

LutheranWoman

July/August 2011

TODAY



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Rooted in Common Ground A Joyful Exchange
Choosing Joy To Follow and to Serve





“...She has performed a good service
[tr. a beautiful thing] for me... Truly I
tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed
in the whole world, what she has done will
be told in remembrance of her.”

- Mark 14:6-9 (NRSV)

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Legacy Society

Ka • los - **καλός** [Greek] good; lovely; beautiful.

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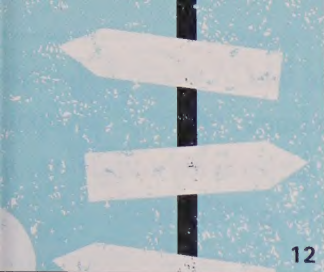
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RENEW, RESPOND, REJOICE!

VOLUME 24 NUMBER 6 JULY/AUGUST 2011

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VOICES

Respond and Rejoice

by Kate Sprutta Elliott

This summer we are reflecting on the theme of the Women of the ELCA triennial gathering—Renew, Respond, Rejoice! The gathering is being held in Spokane, July 14–16. If you are reading this magazine at the event, welcome! If you aren't able to attend the gathering, we invite you to join us in spirit by spending some time doing things that renew your faith, respond to the grace God has given you, and go out rejoicing in the many blessings of this life.

In our summer Bible study, the authors write that faith invites us to see God's response to us: "When we see God smiling at us, encouraging us, inspiring us, and promising to bless our responses—then we can know that what we have done has already made a difference."

We can respond to God's gifts in many ways. In "Rooted in Common Ground," writer Aaron Cooper tells how people of faith are making a difference through community gardens and feeding ministries. Cooper writes about All Saints Lutheran Church in Spokane, Wash., "The last few years, 700 to 800 pounds of produce from the garden has been donated to All Saints feeding ministries. 'The garden has become a centerpiece for the neighborhood,' said the pastor."

On a global level, Andrea DeGroot-Nesdahl encourages us to make a difference through the ELCA Malaria Campaign. She tells us, "A child under age 5 dies every 45 seconds in Africa from malaria: treatable and preventable

malaria." The ELCA Malaria Campaign will raise money to help companion churches in Africa with education, net medical assistance, and more.

Sometimes the call to respond makes us tired. We may come to feel worn out and, worse yet, resentful. "Renew, Rejoice, Respond...Resent?" Audrey West begins her article: "This is the day that the LORD has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it. There is so much to do, and so little time!" She goes on to remind us that even Jesus took time away from the crowd to pray and be renewed; she encourages us to go and do likewise.

One important way we connect with God and experience renewal is through worship and especially, Holy Communion. Julie Kanarr writes in "A Joyful Exchange" that we are nourished in community at the Eucharist. It strengthens us to respond: "Refreshed by the meal, we rise from the table and are sent out into the world renewed as Christ's body in mission."

Finally, in "Choosing Joy," Kathleen Kastilahn shares the story of how four women follow different paths that lead them to rejoice. She admonishes us: "What we forget is that we have a choice to involve ourselves in activities that can lead us to rejoicing. It's not a passive proposition, waiting for the next good thing to come our way."

May you find ways this summer to respond to God's blessing with joy. 🌿

Kate Sprutta Elliott is editor of *Lutheran Woman Today*. You may contact her at LWT@elca.org.



VE US THIS DAY

n Act of Hope

erry L. Bowes

Gardening is an act of faith, an expression of hope. This time of year is a time of celebration for my husband, Steve, and me. We love to garden and have a sizeable vegetable garden and meandering flower beds. The roses are extravagant in color and aroma. The cucumbers are prolific. The tomatoes and corn are flirting with us as they near fruitfulness. The zucchini are already outpacing all my recipes. It's time for us to do a yippee-skippee dance.

One thing we have learned is that gardening is most fun when it is done with others, especially our kids and grandchildren and their friends. The garden becomes a setting for a treasure hunt. "Did you see the spinach coming up? The green tomatoes?" Joyous surprises greet us at every turn.

Of course, gardening in high summer requires a lot of work and stamina. July and August are hot and dry in Colorado, so the gardens require irrigating and tender loving care. The weeds, on the other hand, seem to thrive on hot and dry. Pulling weeds is a bit less aggravating since our 10 hens love them. In appreciation, they each turn out at least one egg a day.

It helps on those sweaty summer days to laugh out loud occasionally. Our grandson Peter, at the age of six, took his farming duties seriously. He had helped us harvest root vegetables: radishes, carrots and beets. As the corn began to send up little green spears, he pulled several of them and inspected their roots. "Nope, they aren't ready yet."

My daughter Missy and I freeze and can corn and peas and beans and can peaches and pears. We make and can salsa and *pico de gallo*. Still, in good years, our bounty far exceeds our needs. Then we give veggies and eggs away. Nothing goes to waste, and we have made fast friends over a dozen warm brown eggs.

Whether we garden or not, most of us have come to take for granted the chain grocery stores in our community. We accept the variety of choices as our due. Even small towns have some sort of country grocery store. We forget or turn away from the food deserts that exist in this country—most common in under-resourced urban areas.

My heart aches for those parents trying to feed their children on the expensive food from a quickie mart. Those hot dogs and sodas are no nutrition for growing, learning children who deserve better.

What can we do to support and feed those families? I don't have any answers. I can't grow enough tomatoes or produce enough eggs. A group of faithful women, however, is a force to be reckoned with. Perhaps the answers lie with Women of the ELCA.

In this triennial gathering year, relish the community of women around you. Laugh and go on treasure hunts together. Learn something new. Most of all, engage the challenge of feeding the children. 🌿
Terry L. Bowes served as interim executive director of Women of the ELCA (1996–97). She is devotional writer and speaker and a member of Rejoice Lutheran Church in Erie, Colo.



ROOTED IN

COMMON GROUND

by Aaron Cooper

IT ALL STARTED WITH A BOWL OF SOUP. On a chilly evening about four years ago, a neighbor invited Robert Chenault Jr., to dinner at All Saints Lutheran Church in Spokane, Wash. Every Tuesday night, the congregation hosts a free meal for 100 to 150 people who are homeless or have low incomes. New in town and trying to make a fresh start after being in prison, Robert appreciated the idea of a warm bowl of soup and getting to know other people. After dinner, he discovered something interesting.


In front of All Saints, Robert noticed several patches of lawn that had been torn up and converted into small garden plots. He inquired about the operation and learned that the church's sprinkler system had failed not long before. In the process of tearing up the sprinkler system, Pastor Alan Eschenbacher and other church workers received a visitor. A neighbor walked

by and remarked, "That looks like some really good dirt. What would you think about letting some people garden here?"

Pastor Alan agreed. He and his son rented a sod cutter. They removed the sod from a small portion of the lawn and turned it over to a few people.

"It was a little disorganized at first," said the pastor. "We just kind of planted some stuff, and even that year we got some good tomatoes and other things for the soup kitchen."

Robert and his partner, Leona Brumitt, asked if they could tend a piece of the garden. The following year, more people came out of the woodwork, and the idea took off. Robert and Leona were asked to oversee garden operations, Robert in the field tending to gardening mechanics and Leona coordinating the business end of things.



"We basically act as liaisons between the community and All Saints Lutheran Church," said Robert, referring to the fact that the garden is open to anyone, including non-members. From the beginning there have been more non-member gardeners involved than members of the church. And a few people—like Robert and Leona—have joined the church because of their involvement in the garden.

FEEDING MINISTRIES

A typical day for Robert during gardening season involves tearing up parts of the lawn, enriching new soil, and fertilizing soil with organic compost made from scraps produced by All Saints' Tuesday-night dinners.

"It's an impressive thing," Pastor Alan said. "It's all green. It's an

organic garden. There are no harmful fertilizers or pesticides used."

The garden now hosts 20 to 25 families. Each plot—some are tended by individuals, some by couples—has a family assigned to it. Each family is asked to donate about one quarter of their produce to the church's feeding ministries. Many who have joined the garden in recent years had never gardened before, and Robert happily gives them pointers.

To start the growing season this year, there were 10 families on the waiting list. Plots left vacant by tenants who decided not to return are prepared for new gardeners to take over. "It's a wonderful opportunity for a lot of us who don't live in apartments to have a garden," said Robert. "Organic produce is so expensive in the stores."

"We get our food from Second Harvest [a community food bank]," said Robert. "Seventy-five percent of what we can use. Twenty-five percent might be too

wilted. So I take it out into our compost pile, and I turn it back into soil which then gets put on the garden, which then feeds the people again. It's so rewarding to be a part of that whole cycle of life."

"We have such a different mix of people that do their gardening with us that I know people I might never have met just walking down the street or even going to church or wherever one might find a social hub," said Robert. "It's brought those of different socioeconomic levels and classes together on a common—literally—ground."

BROWNES ADDITION NEIGHBORHOOD

All Saints rests atop a cliff on the west edge of downtown Spokane, overlooking Hangman Creek and the Spokane River Valley. Brownes Addition spans roughly six by 10 blocks, a relatively small neighborhood.

"There are many low-income apartments in the neighborhood," said Pastor Alan. "It's kind of understood that if you are looking for a cheap place to live you start looking in Brownes Addition. It's still \$450 a month for a studio apartment. On the other hand we have millionaires who are living in \$1 million or \$2 million condominiums that are gated and overlook the water. People from these two groups live across the street from each other." The area represents the highest population density in Spokane County and one of the highest in the state, according to Pastor Alan.

The last few years, 700 to 800 pounds of produce from the garden has been donated to All Saints feeding ministries. "The garden has become a centerpiece for the neighborhood," said the pastor. "We're a walking neighborhood...a lot of apartment buildings and old houses where people go out for walks all the time. Almost all the walking paths include coming by the church garden, because everybody wants to see what's going on."

"I think the real value to the congregation [in having this garden] is accepting people who are different,"



Left: Lindsey Paxton, right: Robert Chenault Jr. (photos by Dolly Owen)

invitation—‘Hey, come join us,’ with no strings attached—has brought more people through these front doors than we’ve seen in a long time. Whether it’s a middle-aged woman spending time with her elderly mother or a little kid that gets home from school and goes to water the family plot with his dad...it’s just been wonderful.”

For photos of the garden, visit
www.allsaintslutheranspokane.com

Pastor Alan said. “That was the challenge when we started this whole ministry. You had people who asked, ‘You mean the homeless people are going to be in the church?’ Well, unless we’re gonna feed them out on the lawn, yeah. There was that break-in period where people had to accept the idea. But this is what Jesus taught us to do. Once people got to the hospitality part, they said, ‘Yes, these are children of God. We love them.’ Then things just kind of opened up.”

Dolly Owen lives next door to the church and became intrigued about the garden. “I’ve gardened all my life,” she said. “I learned it from my mother and thought it was wonderful. So, I went and asked Pastor Alan about it. Now I live in the city and not the country, and I can still garden.” Dolly procured a plot for herself and coordinated the project for the first few years.

“There are several community plots that we share,” said Dolly. “Everybody helps everybody, and that’s what’s been great. If someone goes away for a week, we all tend to all the plots.”

“I can’t tell you how often folks just stroll by in the evening,” said Robert, “hand in hand toward sunset, admiring the beauty of our garden, and stop and just chat. To have that representation in front of our church without being preachy, that kindness, that

URBAN GARDENING IN OHIO

Many people approach retirement with thoughts of resting from their labors, taking up a new hobby, or going on vacation.

Not Job Ebenezer. Upon retirement in 2006, he founded Technology for the Poor, a nonprofit organization devoted to developing and innovating technologies for sustainable agriculture and disseminating them to people living in poverty throughout the world.

Technology for the Poor focuses on simple yet effective technologies, including container gardening. Especially helpful in urban settings, a container garden is housed in an inexpensive container, typically a children’s plastic wading pool. This allows people to plant gardens in places where gardens are not usually possible, such as rooftops, vacant city lots, brown fields, and unused portions of parking lots.

In 2007, Job settled in Columbus, Ohio, and joined Ascension Lutheran Church where he launched a container garden project. The church allocated one of its six acres for the project, and Job enlisted volunteers to help plant more than a dozen containers filled with vegetables. The project yields over 1,600 pounds of produce annually.

Though the congregation has struggled financially, Ascension shares its bounty with others. One benefi-

y is the Helping Hands Health and Wellness Center
t serves adults without health insurance.

"After giving away vegetables and fruits to Helping
hands and three food pantries in our area, we keep
one of these fruits and vegetables on a table after Sun-
day morning services, so people can take and donate
something," Job said.

FROM COLUMBUS TO TANZANIA

The efforts of Job and his fellow members reach
beyond Columbus. Nearly 40 members of Ascension
are from Tanzania. Pastor Tim Muller once asked Job
to talk about his work with Technology for the Poor in
Sunday school. He obliged with PowerPoint presenta-
tions in hand and showed students and teachers about
digital-power technology and other ideas. One woman
in Tanzania, a nurse, said, "Dr. Ebenezer, it would
be so nice if you could come to our place and teach
these things to our people."

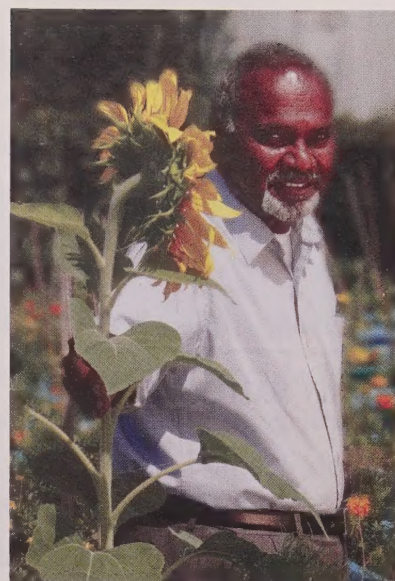
In 2009, Job traveled to the Kashasha/Bukoba area
in Tanzania where most of the Tanzanian members are
from. He showed people there what agricultural and
gardening technologies they could adopt for the benefit
of people living in poverty. The people there invited Job
back a year later to work with a program called Huyawa,
which has received ELCA World Hunger grants.

Job worked primarily with women who had lost
their spouses to AIDS, implementing container gardens
beside their homes. Though most knew how to gar-
den, many were elderly and frail.

"These women are not able to go to the garden or
to dig or cultivate because of the hard work," said Job.
When I showed them the easier way to use plastic
bags and water bottles to grow radishes and then tie
them to pencils or any other way to grow a vertical
garden, they are able to grow vegetables right next to
their huts."

Ascension invested \$1,000 to create a microfinance
program for 20 women in the Huyawa program.

Each received \$50 to
buy containers, seed,
and fertilizer. Some of
the food is consumed
by each woman and
her family, and the
rest is sold at local
markets for income.
Each woman agrees
to pay back the loan
within a year or two,
creating a revolving
loan fund.



Job Ebenezer (photo by Larry Hamill)

"We are pleased
that the majority of the women and some members of
[Huyawa] staff implemented what [Job] taught," said
the Rev. Christopher Mbuga, director of the Huyawa
program. "I witnessed that when I visited some of them.
Some neighbors have learned from them and have also
implemented [gardens]. We are grateful to the members
of the congregation who are behind this project."

"Lutheran churches have so much potential in
terms of human and financial resources," said Job. "We
are only tapping a portion of that. Just imagine the
amount of work we can accomplish in the world and
how we can strengthen the churches back in Tanzania
and other places by integrating them to do microenter-
prises and other kinds of things." 🌿

Aaron Cooper is a freelance writer and editor based in Chicago.

Lutherans Restoring Creation

Lutherans Restoring Creation (LRC) is a grassroots movement
within the ELCA, seeking to foster care for God's good creation
in all expressions of this church's life.

Visit lutheransrestoringcreation.org to glean ideas and
read stories about how congregations, synods, and other
expressions of the ELCA are making green strides in their daily
lives. Read the LRC blog, and follow LRC on Facebook and
Twitter.



FAMILY MATTERS

Family Vacations

by Elyse Nelson Winger

I can smell it now: the beer and cigarettes from last night's customers with hints of cheap pizza and fried fish. Vinyl chairs, still after a night of swirling, and a jukebox in the corner, quiet after a night's carousing, speak low to the girls who pass by. Maybe Dad will give us a quarter so we can vie for a song or two. Perhaps. For now, we're bound for the dining room, where pots of hot coffee and pitchers of hot syrup sharpen and sweeten the air.

The light off the lake beams across tables heaped with breakfast food. Canadian bacon and pancakes, hash browns and fruit cocktail, eggs reflecting the morning's rays and shining sunny-side up: all of that, with a side of relaxed parents (who'd definitely fork over a quarter or two) spells sabbath abundance. Was that heaven? No, it was Paradise! Perched on the shores of Balsam Lake, Wis., Paradise Supper Club was home to Saturday night revelry and Sunday morning brunch for the locals and lake vacationers alike.

Paradise Supper Club was where my family and I often headed after worship at the little Lutheran church in town and where one could choose to park the car in the lot or the boat at the dock. I've been to lovely restaurants in big cities in different parts of the world, but ask me where I'd love to go again with my parents and little sis and I'll tell you straight: Paradise. And it's not just because those eggs were fried in perfect squares or because I'd love to hear "Freeze Frame" on the 1980s jukebox. It's because Para-

dise was part of the magic of vacation time at the lake.

At our little cabin in the woods, complete with outdoor plumbing, our bus schedules ceased. Dad fished, napped and boated. Mom made bran muffins and frog-eye pasta salad for friends passing by. Sister Em (short for Emily) and I spent hours jumping off the dock and lounging atop rafts, fluttering our feet away from fish and weeds. I have traveled many places in my life, but ask me again where I'd go in a moment and my answer's the same: to the lake, outhouse and all. It was there where water and sky, woods and back-country roads, family and family friends concocted a childhood spell of happiness. As an adult, I'd call it sabbath joy. But as a child, I'd call it *magic*.

"When can we go to Disney World, Mom? *Everyone* in my class is going and we never get to go *anywhere*." Sound familiar? The other day, Daniel brought me into the living room, re-wound the commercial for Disney Cruise Line and waxed eloquent. "Look! There's a kid zone and swimming pools. And Mom, there are restaurants just for you and Dad!"

The advertisers delivered their message perfectly to that representative of the under-age-12 demographic; his eyes were wide with wonder. I just smiled and said: "Yep. That looks pretty fun."

There is something compelling about this fantasy universe, and friends of many stripes and styles have reported loving their time at theme parks and

ps. Yet, I am suspicious. Am I being judgmental about an experience I've never had? Or, do I really resent Disney's basic M.O. of conspicuous consumption and sunny joy promised to families—provided they can afford the vacation package?

In his book, *Sabbath*, Danender writes this: “Many modern-day ‘vacations’ have the allure of cotton candy—a brightly colored candy puff on a paper stick that promises fullness and is nearly impossible to eat without sticky compromise. Once we tear into the sugary diversion, it disappears in a flash and offers no substance. The powers and principalities of consumerism demand we taste diversionary breaks that intensify our hunger for more goods rather than a Sabbath rest that brings us taste of genuine good” (*Sabbath: The Ancient Practices Series*, Thomas Nelson 2009, p. 11.)

Could a trip to Disney bring our family sabbath joy? It's possible. But it's just as possible that these trips mostly provide escapist eating from life instead of the recreation and rest we truly need. The kids want magic. And the good news is that we don't *have* to take a trip to an expensive theme park to get it, for in addition to Disney camping, I also heard this: “Do you know what I love most about Twin Bridges? I love being in the

boat—just with Uncle Scott, Ellie, and Beau—and then jumping off the boat and swimming in the water.” My daughter Catherine's reflection, offered up out of the blue, was over as soon as it had begun. But that was all that was needed. Her memory evoked the magic of camping and the joy of spending hours in the clear and cool waters under North Woods trees.

Twin Bridges Park in Wisconsin is Catherine's and Daniel's Balsam Lake, where fishing with uncles and boating with cousins combine to make their own spells of childhood happiness. It is where they re-connect to summertime water and sky, pine-needle-covered earth and mossy rock, family and family friends. It is where they get to play board games with Grandma under drippy tarps until the sun comes back again and where the perfume of the week is mosquito-repellant. It is where they get to choose candy bars and pop at the marina, even before lunch. It is where our over-programmed lives pause and the only schedule that matters is who's on deck for tubing. They've got magic. They've got it in spades.

But here's the irony for this sabbath-desiring, magic-longing mother: I don't like to camp. Really. Don't get me wrong: I love being on the water, and long conversations with my sisters-in-law. I love walking in the woods and grilling



bratwurst on the grassy beach. But camping is not my thing. In fact, I'd rather lay me down to sleep in anything else *but* a sleeping bag (say, perhaps, a Disney-themed princess bed). Which makes me wonder: Did it make my mother batty to boil all those packages of Acini de Pepe, combine them with canned mandarin oranges, pineapple, and marshmallows, and serve up that summertime frog-eye salad for weekends on end?

Did Mom really enjoy the labor of cooking with a small stovetop and only a cold water tap? And how fun *was* it to clean that outhouse? Probably not much. But she knew that Balsam Lake was magic for her daughters, and recreation and rest for us all. So I will camp at Twin Bridges every summer we have the chance, because I know the kids need magic and that one day, Spirit willing, they'll call it sabbath joy. ☘

The Rev. Elyse Nelson Winger serves as associate pastor for worship arts and mission at St. John's Lutheran Church in Bloomington, Ill. She and husband, Stewart, have two children, Catherine and Daniel, who are in the delightful elementary-school years.



by Kathleen Kastilahn

Rejoice. And *choice*. The two words aren't ones we expect to find used together. When something wonderful happens—a son's engagement, a friend's negative biopsy report, our being tapped for a long-awaited promotion—we rejoice. Even something as trite (but true) as a late summer sunset brings joy to our souls.

Rejoicing. Joyful. Isn't that the way we want to greet each new day? But minds filled with to-do lists, hearts busy with wishes and souls heavy with worries—these distract, and we can come to the end of the day having missed out on joy. What we forget is that we have the choice to involve ourselves in activities that can lead to rejoicing. It's not a passive proposition, waiting for the next good thing to come our way. It requires our initiative.

It starts with our paying attention to our lives: What are we good at? Making soup? Reading with children? Organizing events? Painting—walls or landscapes? Ask how might these skills help others? Where are they needed? In their book *Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life*, Mary Ann and Fred Brussat point out that “[O]ften the most fulfilling acts of service are the ones that grow naturally out of our God-given talents, interests, and skills.” And in its companion volume, *Spiritual Rx: Prescriptions for Living a Meaningful Life*, the Brussats point to joy as an essential spiritual practice. They describe it as “the deep satisfaction we know when we are able to serve others and be glad for our good fortune.”

Clearly, it's our choice to pursue joy. This isn't a solo endeavor, however. Never has been. Rabbinic teachers have said joy comes from “collaborating with God in our destiny.” With such a partner, surely we can move on our way to rejoicing. And each of us will find her own way. Consider the paths of four women, each very different but all leading to rejoicing.

Worked out

Monica Perin had known about the Literacy Council of Fort Bend County in Texas for several years and knew, too, it offered classes in English as a second language. The suburban Houston woman wasn't drawn to investigate, however, until last fall when she realized she just wasn't “busy enough.” She teaches two classes in communications law at the University of Houston.

And she loves volunteering weekly at the local food pantry, an ecumenical endeavor supported by area congregations including New Hope, Missouri City, where she is a longtime member. Still, she had time and she was getting depressed.

When the literacy program director learned Perin, 64, was a retired journalist, she asked her to start teaching a writing class for people who were fluent in English, but needed instruction in composition and grammar.

“I'm teaching where to put punctuation, not to leave fragments,” Perin said. “And all these well-educated people—from Chile, Eritrea, Northern Sudan, Pakistan, and more—are telling us about their countries. It's just amazing what they can contribute to class.” One week her lesson included readings on race issues, and the students wrote their memories from childhood and how their perspective as adults has changed. She says her knowledge and understanding of the world has grown, as has that of her 10 students. “They're interested in what they learn from each other. And the program director tells me they so appreciate the class and what I do.”

Recently, Perin took the class on a field trip to the food pantry because she wanted the students to be able to see it in action and, perhaps, help out and interact with the clients. She also considered that it would make for a good writing assignment.

“It worked out,” she said. An understatement, as in paper after paper she read how her students, immigrants all, were affected by their experience. Here's how Arun, a young woman teacher from India summed up: “This trip I will never forget. I realized how fortunate we are. We should give thanks to God every day. We should give back something to our community.”

And for Perin, too, this new volunteer venture has “worked out.” She said, “This is just what one should be doing, taking faith seriously. After all these years of being a journalist, I believe there's a need to pass along our understanding of the language and how to communicate.”

Let's go

Sue Kessler-Schall remembers a “clear push from God” six years ago when she first thought about the improbable, but oh-so intriguing, prospect of starting up a fair trade business. It was her then-pastor at Galilee Lutheran Church, Pewaukee, Wis., the Rev. Joy McDonald-Coltvet, who delivered the push when she handed her a brochure about fair trade coffee, Equal Exchange from Lutheran World Relief, and asked her to start using and selling it at church.

“I’d never heard of fair trade,” Kessler-Schall admits, “but I’d been on my knees for three months, with the only thing on my heart being a way to do something with the poor.” At 54, the mother of four, aged five to 15, was looking for a different direction. Her 18-year-financial career was ending with the sale of the company she worked for. At that time her husband had lost his job. Still, with \$135 required to set up a company and a computer in her basement, she started her business—Trails to Bridges—knowing “practically, it didn’t make any sense” but trusting that the opportunity was an answer to prayer.

She joined the Fair Trade Association and buys from suppliers that meet its standards. She also stocks items made by people in El Salvador and Tanzania, where she’s visited with church groups. “I’ve seen the people. I know they’re not using child labor,” she said.

For two years she ran the business from her home, filling on-line orders (trailstobridges.com) from inventory piling up through the house. She also traveled to farmers’ markets, church gatherings, corporate meetings, even hospital gift shops to sell. “Part of the joy is hearing people react when they see the work of another hand. To see that energy take off, it’s terrific, especially when you work alone a lot.”

Kessler-Schall now rents a store in Hartland, a Milwaukee outer-ring suburb where she lives. She plans to offer fund-raising shopping events, giving community groups a percentage of sales for their own use. “My

goal is to drive people into the gallery,” she said...and to cut back on packing up to sell off site.

She doesn’t know yet if her business will make it financially in the long-run. “The last three years have been very challenging,” she said. “People can’t buy when they don’t have money.” She continues to work 20 hours a week as a community educator at the Women’s Center of Waukesha County.

And she continues to see good in the everyday happenings, like a letter from the sewing group in Peru that came with a recent shipment of their sock monkeys. The folks in Peru wrote they bought shoes with money from the previous order. “That’s where the joy comes for me,” she said. “I love what I do. I wake up every day and say, ‘Let’s go!’”

I’m getting there

More than 300 volunteers from a dozen suburban congregations worked at the first Christmas “store” of Bethel New Life, a Christian community organization in Chicago that grew out of Bethel Lutheran Church some 30 years ago. The unique store made it possible for some 500 parents living in poverty to select gifts for their children. It was a huge undertaking, hugely successful because of the generosity and participation of many people. But when asked which one volunteer really stood out, Bethel organizers quickly named Terry Murrin for her spirit, “powerful and joyful.”

But Murrin, 51, who suffers from persistent effects of a series of TIAs (mini-strokes), didn’t see herself that way when she read about the Bethel project in the newsletter of her church, Our Saviour’s Lutheran in Naperville, Ill. She and her husband decided to make Christmas 2010 giftless because the couple who lost jobs and their home in the previous two years simply had no money.

She signed up for the Bethel project and enlisted a cousin and friend, too. “When I worked, I always volunteered to make gift bags for the homeless,” Mur-

said. "I didn't want to feel sad, not contributing to the holiday."

She worked the week before the sale, sorting children's clothes and spent one sale day on the gift wrapping line. "The excitement showed in everybody's face, they picked out the paper and bows," she said. "It was wonderful to hear their stories."

When the Murrins moved from Wisconsin, Terri's mother and brother-in-law invited them to Our Saviour's. "Going to church is a newer thing for me," Terri said. A workshop on anxiety taught her about change, she said, repeating its themes: "Changing what's around you will change you. Making what's around you better will make you better. Building happiness around yourself makes you happy. I'm getting there."

big goodness

Lie Jersild Roth created Nell Nielsen in 2006, and from the start the watercolor prodigy, about 8 years old, made friends around the country through the pages of the book Roth illustrated and wrote, *Knitting Nell*. The little girl makes scarves for family and friends, blankets for babies, socks and hats and mittens for the needy. Through Roth's Good Scarf Project, she and Nell have taught other children the joy of knitting for others—even others you'll never know. The good in every stitch comes from a thought, she explained, for a cause or organization, or for a person or group.

But Nell's and Roth's influence didn't end there. Students at the school in Roth's St. Paul, Minn., neighborhood have given "oodles" of scarves to a homeless and runaway teen shelter. A counselor at a Texas school calls on Nell regularly to report on the capstone-good project that has her students making knit hats for newborns in poor countries, needed to keep their body temperatures even.

"I don't hear about it all," Roth said. "But it's a 'big goodness.' Once something starts getting in the airwaves, it just keeps building. People feel that and want to be doing something good, too."


Roth, in her early 50s, first learned of knitting for others decades ago, growing up in First Lutheran Church, Janesville, Wis., as a natural part of handwork that her mother, grandmother, great aunts did. They all sewed, often together on Sundays after church. She recalls the woman-to-woman bond they forged, a common "heart space."

That gave her joy as a girl, and it's something of what she hopes happens in the knitting groups that Nell has inspired. The book, by the way, is in its second printing. Good that it's making money for the publisher, Roth said. Better that Nell and her joyful story of knitting for others will keep being heard.

Joy in service

Different paths, but all walks that are ways of rejoicing. You've no doubt figured out there is no arriving at the end of these paths, no reaching a permanent place of joy. And we know how easy it is to stray and to find ourselves on a road that looks like it leads to riches. Or fame. Or even society's vision of the good life.

Again, the Brussats offer words to help us be ever more a part of our communities, to commit to our hopes. They call it their "daily vow" and offer it at the beginning of each section—each main word—in *Spiritual Rx*. The vow is said silently as part of morning meditation. Read it. Again. And again: "Knowing how much pleasure there is in serving another's happiness, I vow to make serving others one of the joys of my life."

Could this be yours? 

Kathy Kastilahn writes from her home in Evanston, Ill., where she is a member of St. Paul Lutheran Church.





LET US PRAY

Singers of Life

by Julie K. Ageson

Naturalist Loren Eiseley

was an ardent observer of nature. He once told the story of being awakened by a great ruckus in a forest where he was napping. To the horror of many other small birds in that wooded place, an enormous black raven had captured a small nestling and was preparing to make a meal of his squirming prey. As the small hawks watched in silence and fear, the forest became a morgue of anticipated death.


But in the last seconds before the little nestling died, one hawk and then another and another, began singing. The clear notes of their bird song carried across the woods until a great symphony of song shifted their attention from imminent death to the beauty of life. No longer were they afraid. No longer were they focused on death. They were singers of life whose symphony of sound acknowledged the goodness of life even in the midst of death.

Christians claim a God who brings life out of death. Like Mary whose life is turned upside down by an unmanageable God—a God who does wild and crazy things such as making God incarnate in Jesus, we too are asked to be vessels, God-carriers, Christ-bearers and yes, singers of life. Like the widow of Zarephath, we have lots of reasons for not responding. But this generous and unrelenting God continues to shower us with gift upon gift, unmerited love and grace. Our response to the overwhelming love of God, the Singer of life, is to be singers of life ourselves.

We all know loss, fear, and vulnerability. We all experience disappointment and the darkness that is part of life. But I am struck by the words and images painted by Loren Eiseley in the forest that day.

Rather than a cacophony of wailing or the emptiness of silence, harmonious song is raised. In the shadow of the predator and imminent death, the little hawks look up, up into the forested cathedral. Shafts of light penetrate the darkness. Bird song echoes among the vast canopy of trees and forest.

And so we sing. In these months of summertime we sing our gratitude for green and growing things, for time away for rest and reflection and renewal. We sing our thanks for a church that courageously affirms Christ's commitment (and ours) to the poor, the hungry, the outsider, to those caught in all the downward spirals of death.

We sing in response to the Singer of life. As song-makers, life-givers, pain-bearers, we become co-creators with this God of life. We sing because God is here among us, in each other, in the sorrows and joys of life, in the broken places and in the darkness of death. We sing because death doesn't have the last word. We sing because the darkness of the forest is penetrated by the light of Christ. We sing because the Light of Christ is a Singer of life. 

Julie K. Ageson is coordinator of ELCA Resource Centers and director of the Resource Center for the Eastern North Dakota Synod. She is a member of Bethesda Lutheran Church in Moorhead, Minn.

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WE CAN

by Andrea DeGroot-Nesdahl



DO MORE

Children. Dozens of children, hundreds of children swarm around our vehicles when we arrive to see their school or visit a feeding station where they eat. Children, laughing and dancing, singing and staring, delighting in being photographed. Children.

Soft hands tucked into ours as we walked from place to place. Curious, bright, beautiful children. We met a great number of Malawi's children recently while visiting schools run by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Malawi (ELCM).

Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs" (Mark 10:14). I thought of Jesus' words as I walked through the African villages full of children. As I observed them at a feeding center receiving their one meal of the day—porridge cooked in a large cauldron over an open fire. Or as they squeezed together in a small classroom, and the headmaster

explained that this class of second-graders has an enrollment of 280 with just one teacher.

I thought of Jesus' words when the Rev. Joseph Bvumbwe, the bishop of ELCM, told us how he often feels the children's foreheads or faces when he visits the more remote areas of his church. Like any parent

knows, he is checking for fever; that, he tells us, usually indicates the child has malaria.

TREATABLE AND PREVENTABLE

Malaria is a blood-borne disease that is transmitted by a mosquito bite. It affects millions of people of all ages every year all around the world. But by far the greatest number live in sub-Saharan Africa. Of those affected by malaria, most of those who die from it are children under 5. A child under age 5 dies every 45 seconds in Africa from malaria: treatable and preventable malaria.

Malaria has some of the same symptoms as the flu—fever, lethargy, headache, nausea. There's a window of time when it can be treated fairly successfully with medication. But the medication isn't always available, especially in remote areas. It also isn't affordable for people who live in poverty as many people in Africa do. Poverty is as much a cause of malaria as are mosquito bites. People with adequate financial resources don't suffer the same consequences as those living in poverty do, mainly because they have been educated about the symptoms, can receive medical treatment readily, and often have addressed preventive measures in their homes and communities.

Mosquito nets help greatly in prevention. Think of trying to go to sleep with a mosquito buzzing around your head, then multiply that mosquito many times. Just one bite from just one in the swarm could bring disease. A mosquito net helps prevent malaria, but it's not enough on its own to turn the tide on this dreaded disease.

THE CHURCH RESPONDS

The ELCA Malaria Campaign will help our African companion churches equip their members with nets and more. More methods of draining stagnant water where mosquitoes breed; more access to free or lower cost medicine for treatment; more education about the symptoms so treatment can occur in a timely way; more first-responders in communities to diagnose malaria and to help people access treatment; more voices to advocate for government protection from root causes of malaria and other deadly diseases.

The more factor matters to me. It reminds me of a story from my own childhood when my parents took me to a school gym where we waited in a long line for a long time. At the end of the line, we received a sugar cube and promptly ate it. I remember thinking it was odd to stand in line for just a sugar cube when we probably had some at home. We weren't just waiting for a sugar cube, of course, but for the new vaccine that ward off polio, distributed inside the cube. My parents told me that we were now vaccinated for polio. I didn't know what polio was, but thanks to a sugar cube, I wouldn't have to know.

Up until then, polio had been a fierce disease, debilitating people all over the world. But at that moment in my life, it lost its power. Many years later, well into my adult life, I came to know that the polio vaccine hadn't been given to every child in the world. I learned that polio was still a threat and a crippling or fatal reality for too many children. I learned that we could have done more way back when I received the sugar cube. We could have done more to ensure that all children were protected as I was. We could have done more.

Now, with malaria, we can do more. Like polio, malaria is not a threat to children in the United

States. It was largely eliminated in our country in the 1950s. But malaria still exists in other parts of the world—in Africa—for children who are living in poverty. We can do more.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

At the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in August 2011, an action is being put forward asking the whole church to embrace the ELCA Malaria Campaign. If adopted, the action would set every synod, every congregation, and every member, and a lot of potential members, on a course to do more about malaria. Our fundraising goal—"15 by 15"—is \$15 million by 2015. It's a daunting goal. But remember the power of one mosquito? Even small efforts will make a huge difference that creates health and wholeness for children.

The Women of the ELCA is supporting the ELCA Malaria Campaign at its 2011 triennial gathering in Spokane this July by designating a portion of the closing worship offering to the campaign. In 2012–13, the organization is also designating the Malaria Campaign as one recipient of its 25th anniversary appeal.

I have been touched by children in Malawi, in Zimbabwe, and in other parts of Africa over the years. I have had the truth of Jesus' words brought to life: "theirs is the kingdom of God." I am grateful for the role the ELCA will play in the Malaria Campaign as it helps churches like ELCM fight malaria. Mostly, I'm

grateful for children, God's children, who—in spite of their struggles—laugh and sing, dance and pose. I want joy and song for their lives. And I want more—health and hope for a long and fruitful life, free from malaria. I invite you to join me in supporting the ELCA Malaria Campaign. ☸

The Rev. Andrea DeGroot-Nesdahl is coordinator of ELCA Malaria Campaign and the HIV and AIDS Strategy for the ELCA.

TO LEARN MORE

Go to www.elca.org/malaria to find out the facts about malaria and how the ELCA hopes to make a difference in the lives of those at risk and affected by the disease. To support the malaria campaign now, send a check to Women of the ELCA, P.O. Box 71256, Chicago, IL 60694-1256, with ELCA Malaria Campaign in the memo line: 100 percent of the gift will go to the campaign.



HEALTH WISE

The Facts on Functional Foods

by Molly M. Ginty

Boost your bone mass.

Avoid arthritis. Beat digestive disorders.

Read the labels on “functional foods” that have added ingredients with supposed health benefits, and you may think they can cure all your ills. But can juice with glucosamine really keep your joints gliding and coffee with protein keep your muscles strong? Costing 7 to 30 percent more than other grocery items, are “functional” products really worth their high price?

“Packing every product from pasta to pet food, functional ingredients are all the rage now,” says Joan Salge Blake, a professor of nutrition at Boston University and the author of *Nutrition & You*. “But the best way to get their benefits is to eat nutrients straight from the source and enjoy a plant-based, heart-healthy diet that is rich in vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and lean protein.”

Why are functional foods a booming business of about \$60 billion per year? The answer lies in part with our health habits. We need a wide range of nutrients, and Americans are running short on fiber, calcium, and vitamins A, C, and E. At the same time, we’re loading up on fat, sugar, and salt, fueling epidemic levels of diabetes and heart disease—and making 68 percent of us overweight.

Looking for a quick fix, anxious Americans may be lured by the labels that call to us from grocery shelves. But experts caution that this marketing can be misleading. The Food and Drug Administration allows food manufacturers to make claims about how ingre-

dients can affect the body’s function (for example, “fiber promotes a healthy heart”). But consumers often confuse these claims with proof of disease prevention (for example, eating fiber will prevent a heart attack”).

“To reap the benefits advertised on functional foods, you may have to eat a lot of these foods, and in doing so, you may eat unhealthy ingredients that are better to avoid,” says Marisa Moore, spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association.

You can cram down chocolate with added heart-healthy plant sterols. Or you can skip the sugar in that chocolate and dig into a leafy green salad, and then eat sterols in actual plants. You can load up on margarine containing cholesterol-lowering omega-3 fatty acids. Or you can eat two servings of fish per week, get all the omega-3s you need, and skip the fat found in those mountains of high-cholesterol margarine.

In some cases, caution experts, eating functional foods can actually backfire. If you have diarrhea and guzzle fruit juice laced with extra vitamin C, the excess C can send you scurrying to the bathroom more often. And if you’re taking blood thinners for a heart condition, extra omega-3s can interfere with blood clotting and can thus become a hazard to your health.

When are functional foods appropriate? That, say nutritionists, is for you and your doctor to decide. In special cases, these products can fill gaps in your diet. If you’re allergic to milk, fo-

This ongoing column is part of the Women of the ELCA health initiative, Raising Up Healthy Women and Girls. Visit www.womenoftheelca.org for more information.

stance, you're not consuming this primary source of calcium. It may be wise for you to reach for calcium-fortified cereal or waffles—then wash these down with calcium-fortified OJ.

Still flummoxed by functional foods? Below are some basics that you should know. Here's the scoop

on five popular "functional" ingredients—where you can find them, and how, if consumed correctly, they might be able to improve your health. 🌿

Molly M. Ginty (<http://mollymaureenginty.wordpress.com>) lives in New York City. Her work has appeared in *Women's eNews*, *Marie Claire*, *Redbook*, and *Ms*.

For more information:

American Dietetic Association

<http://tinyurl.com/ADAeatright>

WebMD

<http://tinyurl.com/WebMD8foods>

EAT MORE FUNCTIONAL INGREDIENTS

CALCIUM

found naturally in: dairy products such as cheese, milk, and yogurt

added to products including: orange juice, soy milk, waffles, and some breakfast cereals

function: helps build bone mass, ward off osteoporosis, lower blood pressure, maintain a regular heartbeat, and induce muscle contractions

recommended intake: 1,000 mg per day (200 mg per day for people over age 51)

OMEGA-3 FATTY ACIDS

(such as EPA and DHA)

found naturally in: flaxseed, walnuts,

and fatty fish such as salmon

added to products including: bread, cereal, eggs, milk, margarine, soy drinks, and yogurt

function: boosts HDL (high-density lipoprotein or good cholesterol) while lowering triglycerides and LDL (low-density lipoprotein or bad cholesterol); helps protect against heart attacks and blood clots; improves immunity; reduces inflammation

recommended intake: 500 mgs per week (people with heart disease should try to consume one gram of the omega-3s eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) or docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) daily)



PLANT STEROLS AND STANOLS

found naturally in small amounts in: fruits, grains, legumes, nuts, seeds, and vegetables

added to products including: fruit juices, granola bars, and margarines

function: lowers levels of bad cholesterol and promotes heart health

recommended intake: 2 grams per day for people at high risk for heart disease

PROBIOTICS

found naturally in: the human gut and also in yogurt (particularly the type with live cultures)

added to products including: juices, sauces, soy drinks, and extra-fortified yogurts

function: the probiotic *Lactobacillus* can reduce diarrhea and prevent bacterial vaginosis, while *Bifidobacterium infantis*, another strain, can combat irritable bowel syndrome

recommended intake: unknown (because the efficacy of probiotics is still being studied, authorities have yet to establish intake recommendations)

SOLUBLE FIBER

found naturally in: apples, barley, beans, cabbage, carrots, peas, oatmeal, and oats

added to products including: bread, cereal products, yogurt, and soy milk

function: helps prevent heart disease by reducing LDL cholesterol and helps ward off diabetes by lowering blood sugar levels

recommended intake: 30 grams per day

RENEW, REJOICE, RESPOND...

by Audrey West

This is the day that the LORD has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it. There is so much to do, and there's so little time!

Some people jump out of bed at daybreak, eager for another day filled with exciting possibilities: activities to energize their spirits, friends to feed their souls, commitments to express their passions.

Others are more sedate in their approach to the morning, easing into it with a quiet cup of coffee or a leisurely reading of the daily news, yet still looking forward to whatever the day might bring.

Still others experience the dawning light with a sense of dread for all that must be accomplished, all the chores that must be done before the sun sets in a wearying cycle of days, seasons, and years.

I recall some years ago when I found myself situated squarely in that last group. I had a job I loved that involved long hours and frequent and extensive travel. In my spare time I coordinated the youth ministry program at our church, sang in the choir, participated in a community action program for underprivileged girls, and did my best to stay in touch with my extended family on the other side of the country. I understood each of these activities to be a part of my vocation: God's call to use my gifts in service to God and other people. Still, I found myself wishing that God would quit calling quite so much.

One afternoon between trips, exhausted as I contemplated how I would pick up groceries, fix dinner, and still make it to church to meet with a room full of

exuberant teenagers, I stopped by my friend's office, hoping she might suggest a strategy for managing all the responsibilities I was juggling. She listened to my to-do list, smiled, and asked, "So which of those things is God calling you to *stop* doing?"

REALITY CHECK

My friend knew what I was too exhausted to see: It is nearly impossible to embrace the day, much less to rejoice in the Lord, when we are overworked or overwhelmed. As responsibilities expand and the calendar is crammed with more and more activities, it is easy to be snared in the trap of believing that once we mark a few more tasks off of the to-do list, we'll be able to respond to God's call. Take the children to school: check. Plan the committee meeting: check. Volunteer at the library: check. Shop for an elderly parent: check. We work our way through the lists, but the tasks seem never to end. For every item crossed off, two more magically appear.

Martin Luther understood that each person is called to multiple vocations (or to a single vocation with multiple expressions). That is, by virtue of her relationships, one woman's vocation may be as daughter, sister, farmer, and friend, while another shares some of those same callings as well as vocations as parent, scientist, and caregiver. Luther's insight is grounded in the radical affirmation of the priesthood of all believers, that is, the notion that God calls everyone—not only the clergy—to respond to God's gift of grace. We respond by living lives of service to God and to one another.

PRESENT?



There is freedom in this call, particularly freedom to respond out of the unique constellation of gifts received by each person. As Apostle Paul so aptly reminds the Corinthians, “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone” (1 Corinthians 12:4–6). We all are called, but not all of us are called in the same ways.

However, in a dominant culture that values individual effort and hard work, there is enormous pressure to take on greater responsibility in order to demonstrate one’s value as a productive member of society. The ideas of *gift* and *freedom* get lost in an economic climate that makes it necessary for many people to work many hours or take multiple jobs simply to keep food on the table. These cultural pressures may lead us to believe that we need to prove our worth before God or to feel that “it’s all up to me.”

Even as our lips confess that God already saved the world through Jesus Christ, our actions suggest otherwise as we struggle to take care of that expanding list of things to do. Perhaps we even begin to resent God for calling us in the first place. *Please, Lord, there is so much on my plate already. Can’t you call somebody else?* In our hearts

we long to join the prophet Isaiah, saying, “Here I am, Lord, send me,” while in our heads we add, “just don’t make me go anywhere.”

SAYING YES BY SAYING NO

In the story of the exodus, Moses, that great leader of God’s people, finds himself in a similar predicament. In his effort to fulfill God’s call, he nearly burns out trying to take care of everything and everybody—including the task of settling the disputes that arise as the Israelites journey through the wilderness. His strength is renewed only when he follows his father-in-law’s advice to hand over to others a sizeable portion of his workload so that he can focus more effectively on the core of what he is called to do (Exodus 18:13–27).

The Book of Acts recounts a similar situation in the early church, when there was more to be done than the apostles could handle. After Jesus’ death and resurrection, the apostles were unable to fulfill their particular calling to spread God’s word if they were also engaged in the distribution of food (such as, “in order to wait on tables” [or keep accounts], Acts 6:2). Both tasks were equally important, but the apostles could not do everything themselves. So they asked the church to select seven people who were “full of the spirit and wisdom” to be appointed to one task so that the apostles

could devote themselves to another (Acts 6:3–4).

When we feel led to respond to God’s call in a particular way, it is worth asking whether our yes to this call signals a time to say no to something else.

SLOWING DOWN

There came a time in Jesus’ earthly ministry when he called the 12 disciples and sent them out into the cities and towns, where they proclaimed the gospel, cast out demons, and healed the sick, even as Jesus himself had done (Mark 6:7–13). Anyone who has traveled away from home knows that it can be exhausting enough simply to be in a new location, and even more so when job responsibilities are added into the mix. Jesus must have known this too, for when the disciples returned and reported all they had experienced, he did not simply congratulate them for a job well done and send them back out to do more. Rather, he invited them to take a break: “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while” (Mark 6:30–32).

There were still plenty of people who needed healing, and even more who had not yet heard the gospel, but now it was time for the disciples to step back from that calling for awhile in order to be refreshed and replenished. As we respond to God’s call, it is worth asking ourselves

whether it might be God's desire for us to slow down, as the disciples did, or to seek help, as Moses and the apostles did. If nothing else, we can seek support through prayer and the counsel of others in order to discern our faithful response.

PRAY FIRST, ACT LATER

In all of the gospels, and especially in Luke, Jesus frequently takes time for prayer. He withdraws from the crowds and sometimes even from his disciples in order to pray alone (Luke 5:16; 9:10), and he prays before major turning points in his ministry, for example, at his baptism, and before choosing the 12 disciples. These prayer times are not always peaceful and quiet. At the Mount of Olives, before his arrest, Jesus acknowledges the terrifying reality that awaits him in the crucifixion, praying in anguish that God would "remove this cup" (Luke 22:42-43).

For our part, when we feel like God is asking too much, or if we do not know for certain whether a particular call is really from God, it is time for prayer: time to cry out, to question, to rant and rave, to be honest with God about whatever we are feeling and whatever we need, to seek God's wisdom and clarity, to align our desires with the desires of God.

Through prayer we let go of the false belief that everything is up to

us, and open ourselves to awareness of what God is already doing. Perhaps we will hear anew the promise that Jesus gives, his invitation to "come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

Perhaps we will recall that this Jesus, who is called Emmanuel, is "God with us" (Matthew 1:23), and that the God who cares for sparrows cares also for us (Matthew 10:29), even (especially!) when we are frustrated, confused, or overwhelmed.

GOD IS CALLING—NOW WHAT?

My former neighbor, Mary, belongs to a church with an intentional ministry with and among the poor. Recently the pastor announced a need for additional volunteers to serve in the church's homeless shelter, and many of Mary's friends responded by signing up for regular shifts to serve food and hospitality to the shelter's residents. Mary, however, was unable to make that commitment. Not only was she helping to care for her terminally ill father, she also had a job that required long hours and significant leadership responsibility. She simply did not have the time or energy to do what the pastor had asked.

At first Mary felt guilty. But then she realized that volunteering in the homeless shelter was

only one way to respond to God's call to feed the hungry and serve the poor; indeed, there were many ways to serve. Mary could donate canned goods to the food pantry or collect toiletries for the shelter's residents. She could hold the volunteers and shelter residents in prayer; she could make a point of greeting homeless people with a smile when she passed them on the street. She could teach her children compassion and vote for city leaders who would attend to the needs of homeless people in their community. As Mary let go of needing to respond in only one way, she discovered many additional options that felt right for her in this particular season of her life.

Whatever is God's call for us, and in whatever circumstances we find ourselves as we discern how to respond, perhaps Apostle Paul has the best advice:

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:6-7). 🌸

Audrey West is the author of the award-winning 2004 *LWT* Bible Study, "Everyday Surprises: The Parables of Jesus." She has served most recently as visiting associate professor of Lutheran Studies at Yale Divinity School. She lives in Bethlehem, Pa.



A DOZEN PEOPLE GATHER AROUND A TABLE. THEY LIGHT CANDLES, UNFOLD A SIMPLE CLOTH, AND SET A LOAF OF BREAD AND A CUP OF WINE AT ITS CENTER. RECITING FROM MEMORY, A PASTOR SHARES THE FAMILIAR WORDS OF THE STORY OF THE NIGHT OF JESUS' BETRAYAL. WHILE CELEBRATING A PASSOVER MEAL WITH HIS DISCIPLES, JESUS TOOK BREAD, GAVE THANKS, BROKE IT, AND GAVE IT TO THEM WITH SURPRISING WORDS "THIS IS MY BODY, GIVEN FOR YOU, DO THIS FOR THE REMEMBRANCE OF ME."



A JOYFUL EXCHANGE

by Julie A. Kanarr

With hushed voices, those gathered honor Jesus' command and claim his promise, reminding one another that the meal they are sharing is the bread of heaven and the cup of salvation.

Half a world away, several hundred people gather, exuberantly singing their praises to God: "You are holy, you are whole! You are always ever more than we ever understand. You are always at hand. Blessed are you coming near.

Blessed are you coming here to your church in wine and bread, raised from soil, raised from dead" (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 525). They, too, are drawn to a table set with bread and wine. They, too, listen and give thanks for the whole story of God's creative and redemptive work: from the beginning of creation, woven through the history of ancient Israel, and centered in Jesus, who dined with his friends on the night before his death and made himself known to his followers anew after his resurrection in the breaking of the bread. The pastor leads them in prayer as they prepare

to receive this holy meal: "O God, you are Breath: send your Spirit on this meal. O God, you are Bread: feed us with yourself. O God, you are Wine: warm our hearts and make us one. O God, you are Fire: transform us with hope." (*ELW* 69)

Each Sunday, Christians gather in worship to hear God's word and to be reconciled with God and with one another. We come for renewal, hungering for God, and God invites us to a feast. Compared with the supersized portions that have become the norm in fast-food restaurants throughout North America, this meal isn't much: a bite of bread, a sip of wine. Yet is enough to whet one's appetite and assuage one's spiritual hunger, for this bread and wine are the body and blood of Christ.

We offer ourselves in worship and we receive the one who has offered himself for us. We are invited to Christ's table with words like "Come to the banquet, for all is ready. These are the gifts of God for the people of God." Rejoicing in the gifts we have received from God, we respond by giving ourselves away in love and service to God in this world.

DINING WITH GOD

Stories of celebration feasts are woven throughout the Bible. Israel celebrates its redemption from slavery in Egypt with the Passover feast—food for the journey to freedom and new life. God sustains those hungry, complaining Israelites in the wilderness with manna, food from heaven. The psalmist rejoices that God prepares a table of abundance even in the presence of danger. Isaiah envisions that the Messiah's coming will be accompanied by feasting with well-aged wines and finest food (Isaiah 25:6), and with such abundance that even the poor can eat their fill without worrying about the cost (Isaiah 55:1–3).

Jesus tells parables about how when the lost are found, there is feasting and rejoicing. Jesus dines with tax collectors and sinners, as well as with Pharisees and with his disciples. He shares stories of grand banquets where even the poor and the outcasts have a place at the table. Set against a cultural backdrop where strict rules governed who one should and should not eat with, this feast imagery and Jesus' practice of inclusive table fellowship points toward a radical vision of the

when the lost are found,
there is feasting and rejoicing.

reign of God. In God's realm, all are welcome, fed, forgiven, and found in the embrace of divine mercy.

As a communal meal, the Lord's Supper is personal, but never private. Although it is hard to recognize in English translation, the *you* in the phrase "given and shed for you" is plural. We are nourished in community as individual members of one body in Christ. Lay people might be sent out from a congregation's worship to share the communion meal with those who are physically absent, or a pastor may visit and celebrate communion in a home, hospital, or nursing home. Yet

even if one receives Holy Communion while homebound or hospitalized, the meal is an extension of the common table and the community's worship.

In some church buildings, the communion rail is a half-circle, a symbol that those who are physically present are only part of the circle. The circle surrounding Christ's table isn't closed. It stretches invisibly beyond us to include all those who have gone before us, all those who will come after us, and all those who are physically apart from us. No matter how many happen to be gathered in a particular setting, everyone who receives the body of Christ is re-membered and reconnected with the whole body of Christ in every time and place. In this meal we are drawn into the full circle of God's embrace as part of the communion of saints.

BLESSED AND BROKEN

The risen Christ greeted his disciples with the words, "Peace be with you." (John 20:19). He breathed God's life-giving Spirit into them and empowered them to offer forgiveness. We receive the peace that Christ offers us and extend it to those gathered with us. More

than a perfunctory greeting or an abstract concept, this ritualized act of reconciliation is a concrete opportunity to embody God's reconciling love poured into us through Christ. This love renews us for life in community. As God's Spirit is breathed into us

we can exhale and let go of lingering hurts.

The apostle Paul, concerned about dissension within the church at Corinth, implored them to remember that they were one body in Christ and to honor one another accordingly. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus urged his disciples to be reconciled with one another before bringing their gifts to the altar. Does this mean that we need to be perfect in our relationships before we come to the table? No—otherwise, none of us would be worthy of this meal or ready to eat. Our call is not to perfection, but to practice.

If you are at odds with others in your worshipping community, the peace is an invitation to seek them out, rather than avoid them, and share Christ's peace. We are called to a spirit of genuineness and humility in offering and receiving forgiveness, even if it means taking small steps. By sharing the peace, practicing reconciliation, and eating together as the body of Christ, we bear witness to God's reconciling love and desire for peace for the whole world.

As we embrace God's gift of peace, we are also invited to receive and rejoice in the gift of Christian community as it really is, complete with all of its imperfections, flaws, and messiness.

The risen Christ appeared to his followers still bearing the wounds of crucifixion. In his doubts, Thomas came to faith through the risen Christ's invitation to touch his wounds. The body of Christ is both blessed and broken, and in its brokenness, there is room for each of us.

In the community of faith, there is room for you to come as you are, with all of your imperfections, flaws and messiness. Know that you are welcomed and fed, forgiven and strengthened. As Christ's body is blessed and broken for us, we who are broken are blessed.

FOOD FOR BODY AND SOUL

Before we receive Holy Communion, we pray the Lord's Prayer, asking God to "give us this day our daily bread." We open our hands to receive Christ, who is the bread of life. Christ's gift of Holy Communion invites us to imaginatively re-frame how we think about our common, ordinary meals. How might we be transformed through an awareness that everything we eat comes to us as a gift from God?

Holy Communion is a meal where the portions are equal, where status doesn't matter, and where there are no particular guests of honor. For those who are rich in the material blessings of this world, the simplicity and small portions of the bread and wine are a sign of what

is truly enough. This meal is an invitation to trust that God will supply our daily needs. This meal offers us an opportunity to consider what might be the material excesses in our lives, as we come to the "hungry feast" that stands over against our own extravagance.

For those who are poor in terms of the world, or living with food insecurity or hunger, this gift of Christ's body is an invitation into the divine economy that envisions a world in which there is enough for all. At Christ's table, there is a place for every member of the body and food in abundance.

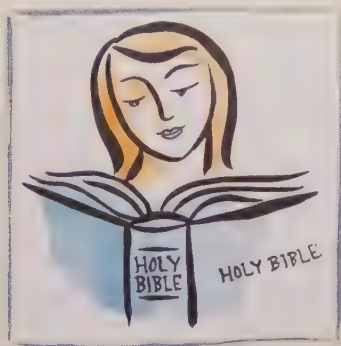
Jesus' command, "Do this in remembrance of me," invites us to remember both his last supper with his disciples, and the whole of his life, teaching, death, resurrection, and promise to be present with us always. The Lord's Supper is not just about the last supper, but also about the next supper. It is a foretaste of the feast to come. It is a meal of death and of resurrection.

At Emmaus, the risen Christ was made known to his followers in the breaking of the bread. Jesus invites us to the meal where he is host and we are guests. And in this meal, we receive a joyful exchange: Christ experienced humanity's suffering, death, and brokenness. We, in turn, receive new life. We discover that we *are* what we eat.

We who receive the body of Christ are fed and forgiven, and called to live as the body of Christ in mission in the world. The risen Christ who invited his disciples to join him for breakfast on the beach and quizzed Peter about his love, also commanded him to "feed my sheep" (John 21:17).

Refreshed by this meal, we rise from the table and are sent out into the world renewed as Christ's body in mission, with words like "Go in peace! Serve the Lord! Christ is with you! Remember the poor!" still echoing in our ears. Rejoicing, we offer our heartfelt response, "Thanks be to God." 🌿

The Rev. Julie A. Kanarr, an ELCA pastor from Port Townsend, Wash., has served parishes in Montana and Washington.



BIBLE STUDY

RESPOND

The cloud of witnesses surrounding us can teach us much about what it means to bring your best self to the life you've been given. This Bible study will invite us into the dynamic web of life anchored by "renew, respond, and rejoice." This is vocation in the richest sense of that term—who are you and how are you called to service in a world full of surprises? There is so much to do. How do we stay spiritually healthy in the face of overwhelming need?

Gifted to Serve

by Catherine Malotky
and David Engelstad

Key verse

Luke 1:46–48

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed."

Materials you will need

- Journal
- Bible
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW, the red book) or *Lutheran Book of Worship* (LBW, the green book)
- Paper cup with a hole poked in the bottom
- Measuring cup with water in it and a bowl to catch the water

Beginning**Reflection**

READ LUKE 1:46–48 ALOUD.

1. Mary received astounding news. Imagine Mary singing this song after learning that she would conceive a son who would be important to the well-being of her people. How would you characterize her spirit based on the words of this hymn?
2. Hold the punctured paper cup over an empty bowl. Pour water into the cup. What happens? What has to happen to keep water in the cup?
3. In your journal, write about a time when the blessing poured into you, and then poured out on someone else. How did you feel about it? What did you notice about the staying power of the blessing you received? Have you ever tried to pour from an empty cup? How did that go?

Set the stage

This session shifts our focus from renewal to response. We often seek renewal—think of an empty cup in need of filling. We invite God to fill us with blessing and affirm our gifts. When we respond, we are pouring out the essence and substance of our renewal. Love, compassion, kindness, and other gifts flow into us, and we respond by sharing our abundance with a world in need. We become servants.

Recall the people of Israel, wandering in the wilderness, being given manna each day by God. There was always manna enough for the day, but no more. This demanded that they both trust God and also discipline themselves to gather the manna each day. Your daily devotions and other acts of renewal are like this practice. These activities become spiritual food so that you might have the strength and energy to serve others.

In this session, we will explore the way response flows from renewal. Critical questions to keep in mind as you study:

- How do I discern which of my gifts God wishes me to offer to others at this time?
- What do I do if God seems to be asking me for more than or less than I think I have to offer?
- Whom do I serve? Where will/can I offer my gifts?
- How do I serve from a sense of fullness?

Learning from the saints

While thinking about *respond*, we will consider the stories of two women: Mary the mother of Jesus, and the widow Zarephath. One was asked to respond as a young woman full of potential, while the other was asked to respond at a time when death seemed imminent. Both are now remembered as faithful responses to God's call. (See "Choosing Joy," p. 12.)

Mary's witness

In the story of Mary's call to be the mother of Jesus in Luke (1:26–56), Mary was a young woman full of potential, engaged to be married, at the front end of a life she could imagine might be full of dreams come true. If you don't know the story, read it to acquaint yourself.

4. What, exactly, was Mary told she was chosen to do? (Luke 1:31)
5. Based on this call or "assignment," what tasks would her job description include if you were to write it? Get specific! What was the time line for this responsibility?
6. What challenges did Mary encounter along the way? Think of Mary pondering how to be the mother of Jesus. What kind of thoughts and questions can you imagine may have gone through her mind as Jesus was growing up? (Luke 2:21–51)
7. What do you think she might have done to provide herself with the support she needed to respond to this calling? What would you have done or what did you do as a brand new mother? (see Luke 1:39–56 and 2:21–24)

Years of tradition and story-telling have smoothed out the challenges of Mary's assignment. For Mary, *respond* was the daily call to love and parent Jesus, and she did so by asking for God's help and trusting in God's blessing.

8. Consider call(s) that come (or came) to you when you feel/felt full of potential and vitality and are literally bursting with life. What does enthusiasm contribute to the ways you respond? How is your response vulnerable if it is based too heavily on enthusiasm?

The widow's witness

The widow at Zarephath's story is told in 1 Kings 17:8–24. It's a story of loss, preceded by the death of her husband, and soon, she believes, her own death and her son's. Read the story aloud.

9. How does the mood of this story compare to Mary's story?
10. Is the widow in need of renewal? What would help her (17:7, 12)?
11. Given what you know about the widow's predicament, if you were the widow, how might you have responded to Elijah's first request (17:10–11)?
12. Recall a time when you felt like you were starving, or felt depleted and empty.

We all go through periods in our lives when we are not getting what we need to be healthy and responsive. When you have felt this depleted, it is easy to assume that God will surely agree that this is not a good time to ask you to part with your meager resources. How do you or might you tell God that this is not a good time for you to be a “provider” for others?

At the beginning of the story, God tells Elijah, “I have commanded a widow there to feed you.” The widow does not hear this command from God, just Elijah does. So when Elijah asks her for some food, her response is guarded and hesitant. For a woman

who parented and tended a household, what kind of hospitality is it to offer such a pittance to a stranger in need? Surely Elijah could do better elsewhere. She must have wondered, “Can't he see that my days of giving are over? Can't he see that God wouldn't want to take what little I have?”

13. The widow's capacity to respond was severely diminished by her circumstances, and yet Elijah asked her to serve. What emotions did she have to muster up in order to respond? What helped her to re-imagine what God might have been up to with this seemingly insensitive request?
14. What did Elijah's request reveal about God's opinion of her capacity to respond? How might this have been a source of renewal for her?

Trying it out

Despite the fact that many people think it's the big things that will bring them happiness, often it's a small act of kindness that brightens their day. A person diagnosed with cancer would like to hear, “It's all gone and will never come back.” But more often, what they hear that brings them hope is the voice of a friend saying, “You and your story are sacred to me. You can tell me anything.”

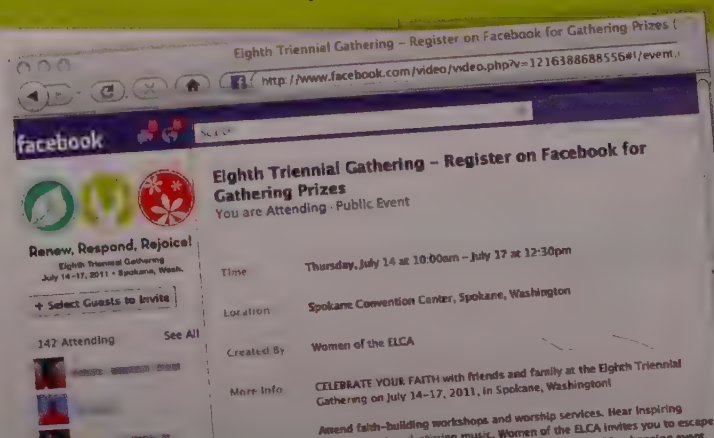
Respond is often a quiet act. Like the air we breathe, it nurtures life without calling attention to itself; often without people even being aware of it. And as such,

not in spokane?

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cultivates humility. Instead of asking, “What can I do that others will notice,” it invites us to ask, “What can I do that others need me to do?”

Self-talk

In the story of the widow’s mite, Jesus commends to his disciples the behavior of a widow whose offering was but two copper coins (Luke 21:1–4).

15. Do you commend yourself when you make a response that seems minor? Why or why not?

16. Jesus also said: “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much” (Luke 16:10). God is clearly aware of our “little” acts of kindness and hospitality and assigns great value to it. What might help you to notice and value this behavior as God does?

It is likely that you are well practiced at this quiet kind of *respond*. Maybe you are so well practiced that, like the widows in Luke 21 and 1 Kings 17, you no longer hear the voice of God calling you to make these responses. Cultivating the habit of responding “faithfully in a very little” is good. But even better is both cultivating that habit and also noticing that God is the inspiration and witness of this habit. Why? Because little acts of faithfulness run the risk of being overlooked by others, even our loved ones.

Self-care

In a context where there is little or no thanks, *respond* can sometimes turn into *resent*. We can feel used, unappreciated, taken for granted. We can wonder: “What difference does it make that I do these things?” We can be tempted to quit responding, as a way either to force others to notice our importance and the importance of what we do; or as an act of giving up and giving in to the perspective that we have nothing important to offer. See “Renew, Respond, Rejoice...Resent?” p. 22.)

This is why it is so important where we fix our gaze when we respond. In addition to seeing those we serve and their response, faith would invite us to also see God’s response to us. When we see God smiling at us, encouraging us, inspiring us, and promising to bless our responses—then we can know that what we have done has already made a difference. No matter what other thanks we might receive, we know God is at work in us and through us.

17. Think of a time recently when you responded lovingly to someone. Recall what you were thinking/feeling when you were making this response. Note these things in your journal.

18. Now, imagine God as the author of your response. See God guiding your acting. Hear God encouraging and championing your response. See God lingering as a witness to your loving, inviting you to savor and enjoy love well intended and spent. How does that change your thinking/feeling? Note these things in your journal.

Closing

Light a candle and remember times when you have been aware of God’s call to you. Close with this offertory prayer:

Blessed are you, O God, maker of all things. Through your goodness you have blessed us with these gifts: our selves, our time, and our possessions. Use us, and what we have gathered, in feeding the world with your love, through the one who gave himself for us, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW, p. 107) 🕊

The Rev. Catherine Malotky and the Rev. David Engelstad have spent two and a half decades as ELCA pastors, serving congregations together in the early years, and then following separate ministerial paths into communications and chaplaincy. Their interests in spiritual direction, coaching, and faith formation inspired this Bible study. They are honored to be the parents of two 20-something daughters and two aging canines. They have just begun empty nesting and are enjoying hiking, biking, writing, and photography.

RESPOND

Gifted to Serve

Overview of session concepts

In our day, we can too quickly imagine that our response to God's call needs to be spectacular. The media brings us stories about momentous accomplishments, and often biblical stories are about the famous or those who had game-changing impact on the life of God's people. However, our response to God's call is often modest, and in fact, it is more often the steady, day-in and day-out responses we make that actually change the world, slowly and over time.

Jesus' mother was not asked to create a start-up business or be volunteer-extraordinaire at her local synagogue. Mary was called to be a mother, to further God's purpose in each moment of Jesus' growth and development.

The widow at Zarephath was not called to make rain out of nothing or rescue her household through ingenuity and brilliant diplomacy. Instead, she was called to trust enough to give away her last bit of flour and oil to the prophet who asked for it. Her willingness to trust was not rewarded with pomp and circumstance. In fact, her son died soon after. The prophet brought him back to life, but she still had to deal with the agony of his decline and death first.

Beginning

Reflection

Gather the group's attention and invite them to center their energy for the session ahead. You could light a candle in silence as a way of creating a worshipful atmosphere. Ask a volunteer to read Luke 1:46-48 slowly. Then work your way through the questions. Though the cup and water is a simple demonstration,

it creates a physical image of how renewal and responses are intimately connected.

READ LUKE 1:46-48 ALOUD.

1. Mary was hopeful and trusted in the promises God said her son would fulfill.
2. The water runs out of the bottom of the cup. In order to keep water in the cup, you have to keep pouring water into the cup.

Learning from the saints

4. What, exactly, was Mary told she was chosen to do? (Luke 1:31) In modern language, she would become pregnant, give birth, and become a mother.
5. Encourage participants to be specific: change the baby's diapers (however that looked in those long ago days); get up at night to nurse the baby; manage skinned knees; feed her child daily; tell him stories before bed; and so forth. The time horizon was every day for the rest of her life, as it is for any mother.
6. Anna and Simeon were the first of many to say things about Jesus that Mary had to either believe or reject. Jesus began exercising his spiritual interests early. In some ways, as a prodigy, he needed special attention.
7. She sought out other mothers, like Elizabeth. She followed the traditions of her faith by circumcising and naming her son (2:21) and presenting him at the temple (2:22-24).
8. It helps you to dive in; get going. It wears off; we can become discouraged; lose our sense of motivation or the energy to persist in our calling.

the widow's witness

the widow at Zarephath's story is told in 1 Kings 17:8-24.

9. Mary's story is full of hope and new life. The widow's story is about life's ending.
10. The widow is in need of water and food, a most basic physical renewal, or she will die.
11. Most participants will probably say they would not respond to Elijah's first request. She has virtually nothing. Why should she share it with him?
13. Trust and hope. She had to re-engage the idea that her days of purpose and service were not over just because her gifts were so meager and ordinary. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways" (Isaiah 55:8).
14. God noticed the widow, saw her value, trusted her faithfulness, and gave her a role that needed to be played out. She had to

have come to the surprising realization: God really still needs me. If *God* deemed her capacity sufficient, that's renewing!

Closing

Do take the time to create a worshipful atmosphere at the end. You could sing a version of the Magnificat as part of the closing. It is the gospel canticle in the Service of Evening Prayer (*ELW*, p. 314-315), or choose another rendition. There are many!

Light a candle and remember times when you have been aware of God's call to you. Close with this offertory prayer:

Blessed are you, O God, maker of all things. Through your goodness you have blessed us with these gifts: our selves, our time, and our possessions. Use us, and what we have gathered, in feeding the world with your love, through the one who gave himself for us, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW, p. 107) 🌿



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TO FOLLOW AND TO SERVE THE GOSPEL OF MARK

by Patricia Lull



People who know the Bible know there are lots of choices when it comes time to choose something new to study. For instance, 2 John is 13 verses long. The Book of Psalms includes 150 distinct entries. Length is only one of the criteria to consider.

The Bible has books that set out the story of God's relationship with Israel and with the Christian church. There are books full of prophetic imperatives and books that console and guide our lives today. The New Testament epistles speak to us through words that were first directed to real communities of faith in the early decades of the church's life. The four Gospels present the living narrative of God's coming to us in Jesus Christ.

I chose the Gospel of Mark for the 2011–2012 study in part because it has been useful to me in my pastoral work with those who desire to learn more about living as Christians today. While I was serving in a parish in southern Ohio, three times in one year I was approached by older children who desired to be baptized. They were connected to the life and educational programs of the congregation and had heard others kids talk about baptism.

I made a visit to their homes to speak with their families about baptism and the desire of these children to understand what it means to belong to Christ and to be a child of God within the Christian faith. Sitting in the living room or at the kitchen table, I listened as parents expressed an eagerness to use this time as an occasion to deepen and renew their own faith. I was faced with the delightful challenge of creating a way to help three households explore the Christian way of life.

I asked each family to prepare for the baptism by reading the Gospel of Mark together and listening to

what that Gospel story was saying about the life of faith.

The evangelist Mark proved

to be an excellent catechist. In subsequent visits with these families I rejoiced to hear parent and child describe what they had learned as we talked about favorite stories and wrestled together with aspects of the Gospel that were puzzling or challenging. Reading the Gospel of Mark continues to be a good step in preparing for baptism or for renewing one's baptismal commitment.

In the midst of change

The choice of the Gospel of Mark for this year's study was also important to me in a personal way. This Bible study was written during an in-between season in my own life. I worked on these sessions during a time in my life when I walked away from a call that I had served (and loved) for nine years. Mark became an intimate conversation partner as I took stock of my own life and began to discern fresh purpose to my own vocation as a baptized child of God.

"What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus Christ?" was far more than a theoretical question during the months I spent studying and then writing to produce these study sessions. It was the central question that gave shape and form to my daily life.

Whether or not you have experienced a sharp transition in your own life in recent months, you know that our church, our culture, and our world are undergoing

found changes. Powerful leaders are being toppled from power. New nations and grassroots movements are being born. How we think of work, the economy, and having enough are changing for many households. The cries of the poor and those in distress are heard in communities large and small. Even what it means to be a community of faith is undergoing transformation in many congregations and synods.

Studying the Gospel of Mark together during the coming months offers encouragement to stand in the midst of change knowing that our lives are supported by a Word that is more lasting and more powerful than the impermanence of our economy or the upheavals we may experience in our family life or congregation. As the evangelist announces in Mark 1:1 this text brings God's good news for every time and place.

Commitments within the study

Alongside the choice of the Gospel of Mark for this study, I brought four other commitments to the design of this Bible study. They are:

- to read and discuss communally;
- to read the whole Gospel of Mark;
- to invite experienced Bible students and first-time readers to join in common discussion; and
- to invite conversation with young adults as part of the study.

Like previous Women of the ELCA Bible studies, "To Follow and to Serve" is designed for group discussion. Although there are plenty of clues and background material to guide those who need to pursue this study on their own, the questions that draw out responses and reflection from other members of a study group are integral to the overall design. Working your way through a careful reading of this text is something you are invited to do together.

I convinced the editors—and now hope to convince you as participants—that there is added value in wres-

tling with the entire book of the Gospel of Mark rather than focusing only on selected, key passages. Obviously, fitting a whole Gospel into nine sessions creates a tight squeeze from time to time. It may not always be possible to cover all the texts in the time set aside for monthly Bible study.

To assist groups, the study guide for each session includes an outline for a concise study of 30-45 minutes, a full study running 55-60 minutes, and for those groups with the luxury of lingering for a longer period of time, an extended study of 75-90 minutes. The materials allow individual participants to read the passages not discussed together on their own.

Knowing that familiarity with the Bible can vary greatly within a congregation, the discussion questions invite reflections from first-time readers and welcome the insights and knowledge of the most sophisticated student of Scripture. It is in the sharing of life experiences and response to these texts that we grow in mutual understanding within the church.

Finally, I bring a life-long commitment to ministry with young adults to the preparation of these study materials. I know that only the rarest Women of the ELCA groups will include those under 30 in their midst. What a privilege those groups enjoy in treasuring the Word of God across the generations.

Yet, all of us know and encounter young adults in our children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews, co-workers or neighbors. Each session highlights one particular passage and a wide-open discussion question that can be used to initiate a conversation with a young adult outside the study group meeting.

Key verse and themes

Having described the structure of the study and the pastoral motivations for paying attention to the Gospel of Mark, the most important question remains: What can you expect to learn through this nine-month study commitment?

The key verse for “To Follow and to Serve” comes just after the mid-point in the narrative. The words are voiced by the crowd gathered at the Jericho roadside on a day that a blind beggar named Bartimaeus calls out to Jesus. Jesus hears the man’s cries and calls him to come near. With great urgency the crowd announces to Bartimaeus, “Take heart, get up, [Jesus] is calling you,” (Mark 10:49).

From beginning to end, the Gospel of Mark relays the urgent, beckoning call of Christ for each of us to come and follow. What such following looks like takes on form and definition as Jesus’ own life unfolds from his baptism to his resurrection. From the Jordan River to Jerusalem, we follow the account of others as they hear and respond to Jesus’ invitation to follow him as a disciple. Chapter by chapter the list of those who hear Jesus calling and set aside their old life to follow and to serve like Jesus continues to grow.

Those who join the procession are anything but passive in their obedience. Active service characterizes the lives of these disciples. That service may include telling others about Jesus, preparing food or offering hospitality, or finding ways to honor the lives of those who are little and least.

As participants you are invited to reflect more deeply on your own call to follow Jesus, discovering through this study and group discussion the same joy and courage that once lifted Bartimaeus to his feet and carried him forward in the Jesus way of life.

Six themes run throughout the study. Each reveals something crucial about who this Jesus is in the context of the Gospel narrative and reveals what Jesus Christ means for our world today. The themes are:

- the identity of Jesus as God’s Messiah;
- the meaning of discipleship;
- the kingdom of God;
- the tension between knowing and not knowing who Jesus is;
- hope in the promises of God;

- resurrection as the surprising end; and
- beginning of the Gospel story.

The nine sessions and the study Leader Guide offer background material and prompts for a group to explore these as contemporary questions. Who is the Jesus? What does it mean to follow him? How do God’s will intersect with our lives today? And finally, what does Jesus’ resurrection from the dead 2,000 years ago mean for our lives?

For real life


Think again about those children I mentioned at the beginning of this article or other children and adults you have met who have been eager to be baptized. Consider those times of transition in your life; times in which you were forced by grief or a move to a new place to wonder how on earth you will find the courage and insight to navigate your old life in a new way. Imagine a chronically ill woman in the first century who reaches out her hand to simply touch the hem of Jesus’ robe as he passes on the street or a young man who runs toward Jesus, wanting to ask the question of a lifetime. What does God have to say at just such moments of real life?

As Christians we trust that the Bible is in fact God’s Word in all its liveliness and power even today. The Gospel of Mark is an eloquent, durable, face-paced testimony to who Jesus is and the difference his life makes to people in every time and place.

As your group gathers for each session of “To Follow and To Serve,” you can anticipate hearing something that changes how you see the world, one another and yes, even your own life as a child of God. 🌿

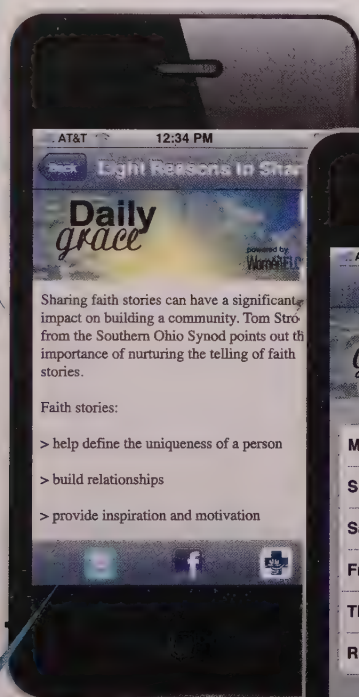
The Rev. Patricia Lull is an ordained pastor in the ELCA. She has served the church as a parish pastor, in campus ministry, and as a seminary administrator and teacher. She first read the Gospel of Mark as a Sunday school student at St. John Lutheran Church in Fremont, Ohio, her hometown.

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BIBLE STUDY

REJOICE

The cloud of witnesses surrounding us can teach us much about what it means to bring your best self to the life you've been given. This Bible study will invite you into the dynamic web of life anchored by "renew, respond, and rejoice." This vocation in the richest sense of that term—who are you and how are you called to service in a world full of surprises? There is so much to do. How do we stay spiritually healthy in the face of overwhelming need?

by Catherine Malotky
and David Engelstad

Rejoice in the Lord

Key verse

Philippians 4:4

*"Rejoice in the Lord always; again,
I will say, Rejoice."*

Materials you will need

- Journal
- Bible
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW, the red book) or *Lutheran Book of Worship* (LBW, the green book)
- Three candles

Beginning

Reflection

1. Take a moment to quiet yourself. Light a candle or close your eyes. Be still and ask yourself, "What thoughts are weighing on my mind? What responsibilities are pressing for my attention? What feelings threaten to erode my sense of well-being?" If it helps, jot down some thoughts in your journal.

READ PHILIPPIANS 4:4 ALOUD.

2. Notice what comes up in your thoughts and feelings. Does this feel like a command to you? Does it feel like it could rise naturally from your current circumstances, or would you have to work at it? Note your thoughts in your journal.

READ PHILIPPIANS 4:4–7.

3. Take another moment to turn inward and be with the peace of God which passes all understanding. Does that change how you feel inside?

Set the stage

We live in a context where our lives are rarely free from complexity, struggle, and demands. You may have grown up hearing and thinking that "daily taking up our cross" was not only a faithful response but also an unavoidable one. You probably knew someone whose

otto is “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” It may even be yours. Those feeling the challenge of life might even say, “Life is tough. Get used to it.”

The Apostle Paul knew that many (most?) people complain about the difficulty of being faithful. They might have reminded him that renewal is hard work and responding takes concerted effort. They might even have said: “And now you tell us that we’re supposed to rejoice in all this effort? Isn’t that asking a bit too much?” Paul surely heard their complaint, just as Moses heard the complaints of the people of Israel in the wilderness. But Paul heard also where they placed their emphasis. They felt they could not rejoice in all this hard work and effort. So Paul repeated his words to them: “Rejoice in the Lord always.” I have not asked you to rejoice in your efforts, or in the challenges of life. But rather, I tell you to rejoice in the Lord—in the one who is with you in all of this effort and amidst all the challenges.

In this session, we will explore the cycle of faith between renew, respond, and rejoice.

Critical questions to keep in mind as you study:

- How do I rejoice when things are complicated or unresolved?
- What feelings inspire rejoicing? Might there be some additional feelings to associate with rejoicing?
- How does rejoicing spring out of responding and lead again to renewal?

Learning from the saints

Miriam's witness

READ EXODUS 15:20 AND NUMBERS 26:59.

4. Who is Miriam?

5. Why did Miriam rejoice? Read Exodus 14:19–31.

6. On the one hand we can understand Miriam's rejoicing, but there is definitely another side to the story. The people have escaped slavery in Egypt, but they now face life in an unknown wilderness. What are they up against? Read Exodus 12:37–39; 15:22–25; and 16:1–3.

In Exodus 15:21, notice that Miriam's song is directed to the Lord (in a manner that recalls the words of Paul). Perhaps she was rejoicing because their lives had been spared. But things were still dire. Perhaps Miriam was not rejoicing in her/their circumstances, but rejoiced because she was grounded in the faith that God would see them through whatever was to come.

This is rejoicing as an expression of faith. Faith declares, “I will look first for what God has done for me” and not merely to what God has *not* done. Faith does not choose to withhold thanks until all current needs have been met. Miriam did not choose to say: “When everything gets back to normal, to the way I want it to be, *then* I will rejoice.” Instead, in front of the whole people of Israel (a people in need of her example), she declared “Now is the time for rejoicing. Now is the time to thank the Lord. Now is the time to live with hope,” even though an unknown wilderness lay before them. (See “Choosing Joy,” p. 12.)

7. Given the people's sense of vulnerability, their grumbling (see Exodus 14:11–12), and fickle thankfulness, it seems that Miriam's dancing was out of step with the prevailing attitude of her people. How do you think she was able to rejoice so unashamedly? What do you think her rejoicing did for the women who danced with her? What do you think her rejoicing did for Miriam's ability to endure the struggles still in front of her (and her people)?

The witness of a paralyzed man's friends

READ MARK 2:1–12.

8. Give your imagination time to really think about the sights and sounds at the beginning of this story. What do you see and hear?

9. Whose faith does Jesus commend? (See Mark 2:5.)

10. Jesus forgives the paralyzed man's sins, and, in response to the scribes' complaints, Jesus also cured him of his paralysis. These are both very good things, for which everyone could rejoice. What did the paralyzed man learn about his friends' commitment to him?

What makes the actions of the paralyzed man's friends an act of rejoicing? Think of rejoicing as whatever response your heart/spirit wishes to make when it feels generous and contented.

Generosity stems from the belief that there is always enough and more to go around. An example of this is the attitude Jesus dared to feed 5,000 people with a few fish and a couple of loaves of bread (Matthew 14:13–21).

Contentment stems from the belief that “I have enough and do not really need anything more.” An example is when Jesus resists the devil's temptation in the wilderness. Jesus' behavior demonstrates that he trusts that God knows what he needs and will help him satisfy these needs in a healthy manner. Therefore, Jesus' responses to the devil seem to be saying: “I do not, however, trust that what you are offering to me is what I truly need or need at this moment” (Matthew 4:1–11).

The paralyzed man's friends could have been like so many who offer pity while secretly feeling fortunate that they weren't in the same boat. What caught Jesus' attention, however, was their faith, the opposite of pity. It was a faith that trusted that if Jesus had healed others then why not this friend? Their faith said not only “What have we got to lose?” but more so, “What a wonderful thing this would be to do together.”

11. What do you think enabled the paralyzed man's friends to reject scarcity and embrace generosity and contentment?

Trying it out

Self-talk

Recall a time when you were able to embrace generosity and contentment. What enabled you to be generous and contented given that our culture so depends on believing that we don't/can't have enough (scarcity)?

It is an odd thing. We often think that our deepest desires are to get what we want. Yet, our greatest joy is often not experienced when good things happen to us, but rather when we are a part of good things that happen for people we care about and love. We could simply chalk this up to our learned modesty—the kind that feels embarrassed by too much attention and worries about being conceited. So it might be hard to be joyful about our own blessings. Yet, issues of modesty aside, rarely does personal good fortune or even a great achievement inspire lasting rejoicing.

12. Do you agree with this assessment? Why or why not?

Self-care

13. How might you cultivate and practice generosity and contentment—a life of rejoicing?

Our deepest and most enduring rejoicing seems to manifest when we use our gifts on behalf of others. When we experience ourselves as generous, compassionate, creative and courageous for the sake of others, it can be renewing. When we give, we experience in that same moment that *a new and right spirit* has been created within us. This is the cycle of faith. When our rejoicing seems diminished or faint, as it surely will become at some time, then we are led to seek the renewal that begins the cycle again. (See “We Can Do More,” p. 18.)

And what's not to celebrate in this?

When we seek *renewal*, we present ourselves to the God who breathes freshness and inspires goodness and nurtures our gifts within us.

When we *respond* we dare to be the creative, courageous and caring people God has shown us we are.

And when we *rejoice*, we experience joy in the way God blesses us and others with and through an attitude of generosity and contentment.

Because God knows we need to renew, respond and rejoice, God invites us also to believe that each step along this cycle reflects an aspect of God's love and desire for us.

In the Eucharist, we see this cycle expressed in worship. God offers a meal to us, knowing that we are hungry to be with God, to have God incarnate and close. In passing the peace, God offers the gift of reconciliation and we clear the air between us, creating the possibility of renewal together as a community of faith. God's response is the meal itself, God giving God's self to all who receive it. God, as host, rejoices that we come to the table set for us, for it is God's desire that we know the love and peace of Christ, and that we take it into ourselves and are renewed. We respond by eat-

ing and drinking, and we rejoice after with prayers of thanksgiving. (See "A Joyful Exchange," p. 26.)

Closing

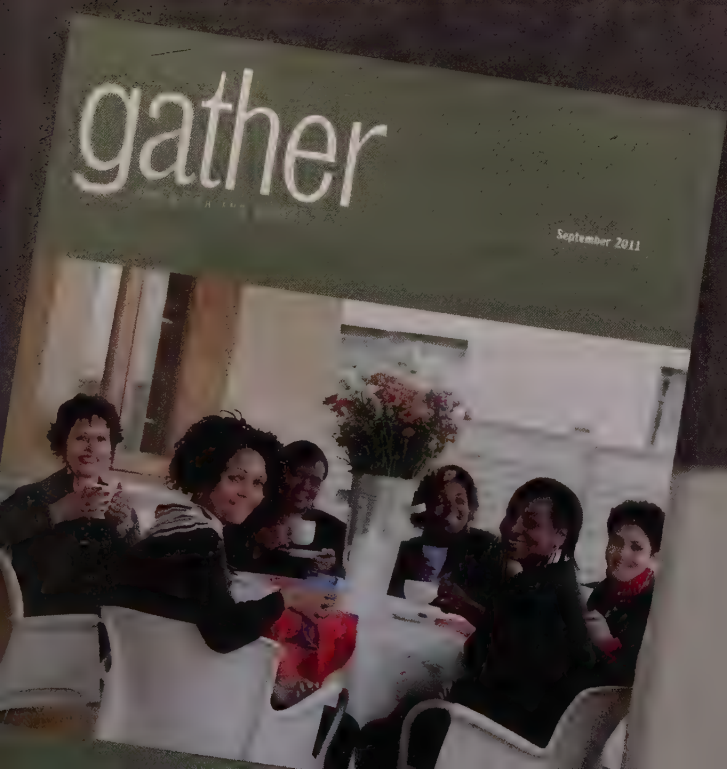
Light three candles, one for renew, one for respond, and one for rejoice. Arrange them in a triangle and remember that they are the anchor points for our life of faith. Remember the cycle of faith, and the movement between these points.

READ PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7 ALOUD, slowly and meaningfully. Give yourself a few moments to let it sink in, and then close with this prayer:

Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (ELW, p. 117) 🌿

**"...Where two or three are gathered in my name,
I am there among them."**

MATTHEW 18:20



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REJOICE

Rejoice in the Lord

Overview of session concepts

Often we think of rejoicing as something that happens spontaneously. For example, when you hear that you have been chosen for a job you were seeking, or when you learn that a tumor recently discovered in your body is not malignant, you are likely to rejoice. In these moments, no one has to tell you: “Rejoice!” Rather, your rejoicing seems to well up inside of you, and you can’t help but want to share your good news with others.

But, in Philippians, the Apostle Paul says: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice.” It’s a command, not a statement of what’s true. Why does Paul think we might forget to rejoice unless we are instructed to do it? In Philippians 4:2, Paul’s letter reveals that there is a conflict or competition of some sort between Euodia and Syntyche, both of whom have ministered alongside Paul in the past, but are now not “of the same mind.” There are plenty of complications in life that can distract us from the work that God is doing. Life is never complete or resolved once and for all. Even death can leave questions and unresolved issues for survivors.

Beginning

Reflection

Ask the group to take a moment to quiet themselves. Light a candle. Be still and ask them to reflect on: “What thoughts are weighing on my mind? What responsibilities are pressing for my attention? What feelings threaten to erode my sense of well-being?” Ask them to jot down some thoughts in their journals.

READ PHILIPPIANS 4:4 ALOUD.

READ PHILIPPIANS 4:4–7.

Set the stage

Here is one way to see what Paul is trying to say. We all know that when a loved one dies, it initially may require great effort to engage in conversations with family or to attend a grief support group. Rejoicing of any kind may not seem appropriate. Yet, what if you rejoiced in the people and the resources that offer you support in the midst of your grief? In this case, rejoicing is not about feeling happy, but rather about feeling grateful. And realizing your thankfulness for support might also encourage you to trust that healing is possible and healing is happening.

In this session, we will explore the cycle of faith between renew, respond, and rejoice.

Learning from the saints

Miriam’s witness

1. A prophetess and sister to Aaron and Moses.
2. The army of Pharaoh—which was seeking to annihilate the people of Israel—had lost all its soldiers; all drowned in the Red Sea. The lives of people of Israel were spared (“saved” Exodus 14:30); and they were finally free of their slavery in Egypt.
3. The people of Israel fled from Egypt with virtually none of their possessions. Water was scarce. They had little food. They were in an unfamiliar land and would have to employ all of their resourcefulness simply to survive.

Maybe Miriam's faith was so sure that she was able to turn to God in thanks without being concerned about the reaction she'd get from those around her. Her rejoicing could have been inspiring to others. Keeping God's faithfulness in mind would help her face the unknown before her people. Trust is a powerful motivator and consoler.

Witness of a paralyzed man's friends

READ MARK 2:1–12.

5. You would see lots of people crowded together. The text is not clear whether they were listening to Jesus talk (it would have been relatively quiet) or if he was making his way from small group to small group (like a party, it would have been noisy). At some point all attention must have been diverted to the ceiling. Then, everyone would have seen the paralyzed man slowly being lowered into the house.

6. The people/friends who brought the paralyzed man.

7. Yet even without this "happy ending," we can see that the paralyzed man's friends have already achieved their goal: to demonstrate the lengths they will go to for the sake of their paralyzed friend. Just getting their friend out of his house and onto the roof of the house was already a victory. And having accomplished that, there was no way the paralyzed man would have returned home—healed or not—without feeling the commitment and support of his friends.

8. Their joy (or rejoicing) in this friendship and the hope that sprang from it is central to their scheme, and it clearly won the day with Jesus.

Trying it out

A point that doesn't need much introduction is that our own society's economic message is that none of us ever have enough. Thus we are encouraged to make consumption our habit and to set our goal as the satisfaction of our needs and wants. This message, of course, is based on the notion of scarcity—a belief that we do not have what we need and a fear that there is not enough to go around.

Closing

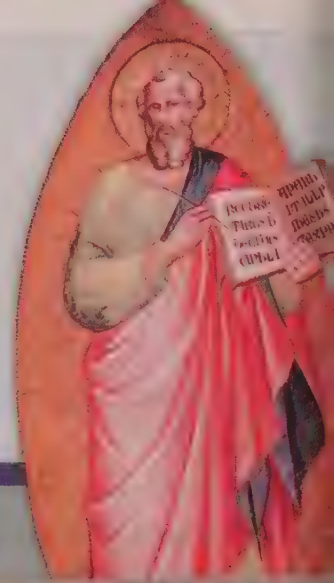
Light three candles, one for renew, one for respond, and one for rejoice. Arrange them in a triangle and remember that they are the anchors points for our life of faith. Remember the cycle of faith, and the movement between these points.

Read Philippians 4:4–7 aloud, slowly and meaningfully. Give the group a few moments to let it sink in, and then close with this prayer:

Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (ELW, p. 117) 🌿

WHAT'S COMING UP?

SEPTEMBER 2011—MAY 2012 To Follow and to Serve: The Gospel of Mark



The 2011–2012 Bible study challenges us—it's an invitation to discipleship in the 21st century. The study emphasizes what it means to follow Jesus Christ today. We are called to a living faith, a deeper and more courageous understanding of what it means to follow the one we first meet in Mark's Gospel at his baptism at the River Jordan.

In congregations that use the three-year lectionary, Mark will be used for the Gospel lesson on most Sundays, beginning in Advent 2011 and continuing through the time of this Bible study and the summer following. While the lessons being read in your group may not coincide perfectly with the Sunday texts, coming to know this Gospel will enrich the experience of hearing each reading used in worship on Sunday.

THEME VERSE

“Take heart; get up, [Jesus] is calling you.”

(Mark 10:49b)

September **TRAVELING MERCIES**

Our spiritual life is a journey. We may not always recognize the path, but we meet companions who go with us and bless us on our way.

Session 1: **Jesus of Nazareth**

Theme verse: Mark 1:15

Focus on Health: Walking wonders

It flattens your belly, tones your thighs, boosts your body's immunity, and possibly prolongs your life. Some research shows it can ward off diabetes and cancer. Here's how to create a walking regime that's in step with your unique health needs.

October **ALL IN THE FAMILY**

From our family of origin to the family of God, who we are and how we see the world depends on where we feel we belong.

Session 2: **Mother and Brothers**

Theme verse: Mark 3:35

Focus on Health: Medical myths that harm

You don't need to worry about catching warts from frogs or developing arthritis after cracking your knuckles. From the misconception that starvation diets work to the belief that back pain will get better with bed rest, here's scoop on the seven most dangerous health myths.

November WORDS MATTER

The stories we tell others and the stories we tell ourselves can make a difference—for good or ill.

Session 3: **Power and Authority**

Theme verse: Mark 4:40

Focus on Health: Bacterial world

In the past 20 years, the production of antibiotics in the United States has decreased sevenfold. Meanwhile, new superbugs against which these drugs are no longer effective are growing ever more virulent. Just one such bug—MRSA—kills more Americans every year than AIDS. Here's how you can stay safe.

December TAKE HEART

In the Bible it seems that angels—messengers of God—are frequently telling us not to be afraid.

What do they know that we don't?

Session 4: **Beyond Boundaries**

Theme verse: Mark 6:38

Focus on Health: Connect. Only connect. 🐹

Whether you share space with a hamster or a husband, living with other beings can help you beat disease—and enjoy a longer, happier life. During the Christmas season, when friends and family gather together, here's the science on how companionship can boost your emotional and physical health.

Jan/Feb 2012 YOU MUST CONSIDER THIS

"Who do you say that I am?" Jesus asks Peter and it is a question Jesus poses to us today.

Session 5: **Confessing Christ**

Theme verse: Mark 9:24

Session 6: **Tough Questions**

Theme verse: Mark 10:49

Focus on Health: Reconsidering C-sections

Studies show that more and more U.S. infants are arriving via Caesarean section, which has

increased fivefold in the past 40 years and is now the most common surgery performed on American women. C-sections are surgeries that you—and your loved ones—should consider carefully before committing to them.

March WAKING AND WATCHING

There are places on our journey, times in our lives, when all we can do is pay attention, trust, . . . and wait.

Session 7: **Rising Expectations**

Theme verse: Mark 13:31

Focus on Health: Health reform, revisited

On March 23, 2010, President Obama signed the controversial Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act into law. Now that health reform has seen its second wave of revision, here's the final upshot for you and your family: a look at how the latest legislation will affect your medical costs and coverage.

April A LAST MEAL

Bread and wine take on new significance at Jesus' last supper. How do we feed our bodies and spirits as we travel on our way?

Session 8: **A Wholly Different Week**

Theme verse: Mark 14:28

Focus on Health: Sure shots

Are vaccines safe? As the U.S. marks National Infant Immunization Week (April 23–30), here's the truth about how vaccines work, the scoop on new shots that have recently been developed—and a checklist of all the basic vaccines that are essential for you and your family.

May THE REST OF THE STORY

We follow in the footsteps of those who are called to share the good news and we do not go alone.

Session 9: **Go and Tell**

Theme verse: Mark 16:6

Focus on Health: Lost for words

Stuttering seized the spotlight with the 2010 film, "The King's Speech." And though it affects just 1 percent of the population (roughly 3 million Americans), it can be socially, financially, and emotionally devastating. Here's why stuttering happens, how speech therapy can treat it, and how to communicate effectively when talking to someone who stutters.

Summer 2012 Bible study

ALONG THE WAY

Have you ever taken a classic summer road trip (or a trip of any kind) with family or friends, as part of group, or alone? If so, you know the conversations you have along the way are an important part of the journey. Your self-understanding, relationships, and spiritual life could change and grow as you travel. What began as a road trip might become a pilgrimage.

In this study, we'll meet some biblical travelers, enter in conversation with them, and explore our own journeys of faith. We'll walk with Jacob, who after wrestling a stranger throughout the night, discovers God. We'll wander in the wilderness with people who complain to Moses about their aching feet and ask: "Are we there yet?" We'll spend time with Jesus' companions and reflect on our faith. The writer, the Rev. Julie A. Kanarr, an ELCA pastor from Port Townsend, Wash., is a pilgrim-student of the Bible who has journeyed extensively by car, bicycle, kayak, foot, boat, and airplane.

STUDY RESOURCES

The only piece essential for the "To Follow and to Serve" study is a subscription to the magazine; however, the following companion pieces add depth to the study.

LEADER GUIDE

The Leader Guide provides the Bible study leader with additional background information not found in the magazine. Included are tips on how to lead the discussion, instructions for activities, ideas on prayers, and more.

ITEM ELCAW01016 \$6.95

COMPANION BIBLE

This handy volume puts the study texts in one convenient place. Printed in an easy-to-read size, it offers biblical texts for every session.

ITEM ELCAW01017 \$3.95

BOOKMARK

The "To Follow and Serve" bookmark is a terrific way to promote the Bible study and makes a great gift for group members. Sold in packs of 12.

ITEM ELCAW01018 \$3.75

BROCHURE

ITEM ELCAW01019 Free

Applicable shipping charges will be included when an order is placed. Call 800-638-3522 ext. 2580 or visit www.elca.org/resources to order study resources. Sign up for an online account and search for WO Bible studies.

Call 800-328-4648
to order a magazine subscription

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3 years/30 issues	\$33



GRACE NOTES

ough Choices

Linda Post Bushkofsky



omen of the ELCA Web site
www.womenoftheelca.org

Call it the recession or

a financial downturn or the phrase *du jour*. Financial realities are affecting us in many ways. I heard a news report recently of budget cutbacks in New York that would eliminate prison guards and close some prisons. The report went on to tell of a funding crisis in the court system in Florida that would likely reduce court personnel. Then the report finished up with news of spending cuts in a Colorado school system that resulted in eliminating bus service for those living within two miles of the school.

You probably have your own stories of changes made in your community, workplace, even your own family setting because of the ongoing economic crisis.

We're no different in Women of the ELCA. Offerings to the churchwide women's organization have been on a downward trajectory for more than a decade. When I began as executive director eight years ago, we had a churchwide staff of 30. Six months later I reduced the staff, and we became a staff of 21. When the fiscal year 2010 budget had to be set in the fall of 2009, a further reduction in staff proved to be the primary way to reduce expenses. The staff of 21 was reduced to 13.

Staff reductions aren't the only changes we've seen. We produce fewer printed resources today. We've had to look for different funding sources for our global education experiences. Some training opportunities are offered with less frequency. At the Eighth Triennial Gathering this month, a first reading of

a proposed constitutional change will occur that, if approved at the Ninth Triennial Convention, would result in a reduced size of the executive board.

The churchwide executive board and staff struggle with the situations created by the downward trend in offerings. Difficult decisions have been made. Even so, much new life can come despite fewer dollars. Look at the 25-plus resources that have been written over the past two years and made available free. By posting these resources on our Web site, we are able to produce the resources at minimal cost. We continue to take advantage of new technology that makes it possible to grow and nurture community. *Daily Grace*, an iPhone app produced by Women of the ELCA, is just one example.

Nearly the entire budget of the churchwide women's organization comes from the offerings and Thankofferings of women like you and me, women who meet regularly for study and service. Meanwhile, in the United States, there are 1.5 million non-profit organizations competing for your donations.

Don't read this column as a desperate request for increased giving. It's not that. This is an invitation to respond in love. Visit our Web site. Attend our events. Download our app. And then respond by sharing the rich blessings you have received with the women's organization so that it can continue to support you on your faith journey. 🌿

Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director of Women of the ELCA.



AMEN!

A Banquet of Mercy

by Catherine Malotky

I have a good deal of affection for the widow at Zarephath, God. Hers is a faith that shines through history, right on me.

Frankly, she puts me to shame. In my middle-class, North American, English-speaking, (relatively) functional-family, married-with-two-children type of life, I have never been in a situation where starvation was a real prospect. I have never experienced the kind of exclusion she must have lived with as a single mother in her culture. I have never anticipated the death of a child because I could not provide for her.

I have, however, done my share of whining as you know, God.

As a young woman, I was angry that because I was tall and bright and verbal, I seemed to be excluded from the ranks of girls who attracted attention by just standing there.

As a young adult, I remember feeling just a little sorry for myself because my gifts of preaching and teaching would never earn what my math-and-science friends would.

As a middle-aged woman, I am distressed at the way age is already making its way known in my life, at how I am adjusting my expectations physically, as well as in other ways. I can get to feeling kind of sorry for myself. A *pity party*, my mother used to call it.

I suppose it's OK to throw that kind of party now and then. Challenges can be daunting, even if they aren't a matter of life and death. I am trying to be a faithful person, to bring my very best

to life, to be in service to my neighbor, to be God's hands at work in the world. The problem with pity parties is what they do to my soul if I indulge them too much and too often.

When I turn my attention to what I don't have, then I can start feeling pretty put upon. This is not the spirit of self-care, mind you. This is about resentment and, eventually, a victim mentality. It turns my attention inward, sours my attitude, and creates a firewall between me and you, God. Although it's natural to go there on occasion, living in a pity party is unhealthy.

My life is not worse because I earn less or better because I earn more. My life is not less blessed if my body just won't do anymore what it used to do. And a request for me to bring my gifts to the banquet of God's mercy in service to the world is an opportunity rather than a burden. Because, if I can see in front of me that banquet of mercy instead of a pity party, then I can see the abundance that surrounds me.

With open eyes and in trust, I can change the way I see the meager oil and flour in my cupboard. In God's way, that oil and flour become renewable stores of life, hope, and joy. A future of possibilities lies before me, full of surprises, some delightful and some challenging, but all infused with your love, God. Thank you for a place at your banquet. Amen. 🌿

The Rev. Catherine Malotky, an ELCA pastor, serves at Luther Seminary as a philanthropy adviser. She has served as a parish pastor, editor, teacher, and retreat leader.

HOMEMADE GREETINGS SHOW BIG RETURNS

Every Wednesday a group of Scrappy Ladies from Peace Lutheran Church, Alexandria, Va., get together to create cards for the church's "Project Boomerang." The mission began in July 2006 with an idea to create blank greeting cards for military chaplains to take to deployed troops. The troops could then add a personal message and send them to their loved ones back at home, thus the boomerang effect. Now, the group sends its homemade cards to Walter Reed Army Medical Center, John Hopkins' Hackerman-Patz Pavilion for families dealing with cancer, St. Jude Children's Camp in Colorado, and several other non-profit agencies.



The cards are designed using stamps, new and used cards, magazines, stickers, and ribbons. Since Project Boomerang's beginning, more than 12,000 cards have been distributed to troops and those in need at home and abroad.

—Submitted by Vicki Haugen

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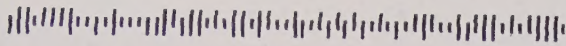
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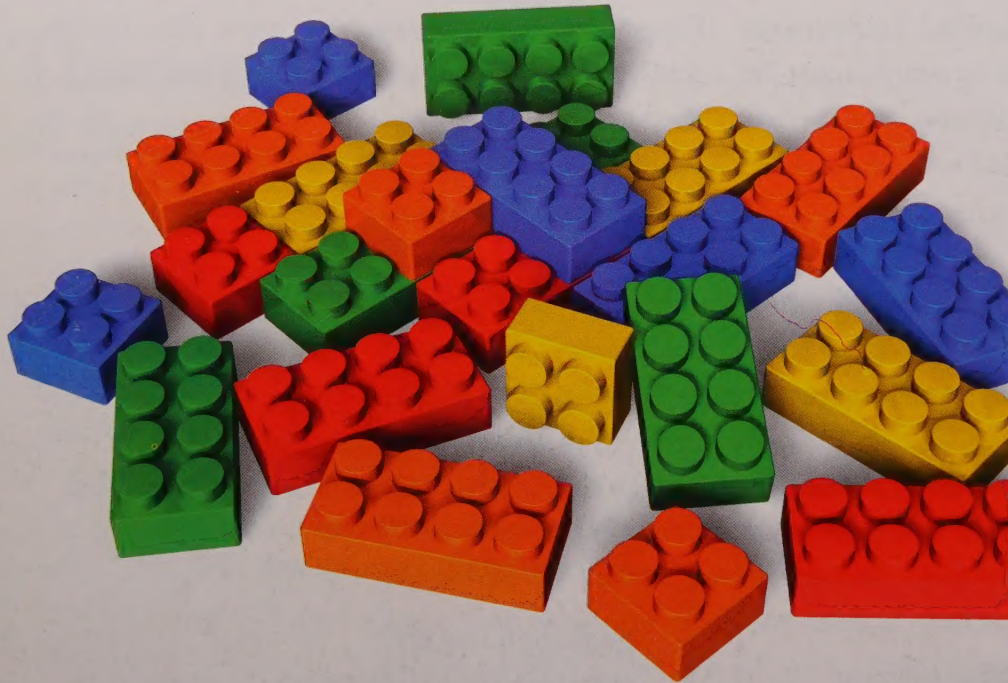
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